Influence of nuclides and chelators on imaging using Affibody molecules: comparative evaluation of recombinant Affibody molecules site-specifically labeled with ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In via maleimido derivatives of DOTA and NODAGA.

Mohamed Altai*[1], Joanna Strand*[1], Daniel Rosik[2], Ram Kumar Selvaraju[3], Amelie Eriksson Karlström[2], Anna Orlova[2], Vladimir Tolmachev[1].

* Mohamed Altai and Joanna Strand contributed equally to this study.

[1] Division of Biomedical Radiation Sciences, Uppsala University, Sweden

[2] Division of Molecular Biotechnology, School of Biotechnology, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden;

[3]Preclinical PET Platform, Department of Medicinal Chemistry, Uppsala University, Sweden;

Corresponding author:

Vladimir Tolmachev

Biomedical Radiation Sciences

Rudbeck Laboratory

Uppsala University

SE-751 85 Uppsala

Sweden

Phone: +46 18 471 3414

Fax: +46 18 471 3432

E-mail: vladimir.tolmachev@bms.uu.se

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ABSTRACT

Accurate detection of cancer-associated molecular abnormalities in tumors could make cancer treatment more personalized. Affibody molecules enable high contrast imaging of tumor-associated proteins expression shortly after injection. The use of the generator-produced positron-emitting radionuclide ^{68}Ga should increase sensitivity of HER2 imaging. The chemical nature of radionuclides and chelators influence the biodistribution of Affibody molecules, providing an opportunity to further increase the imaging contrast. The aim of the study was to compare maleimido derivatives of DOTA and NODAGA for site-specific labeling of a recombinant $Z_{HER2:2395}$ HER2-binding Affibody molecule with ^{68}Ga. DOTA and NODAGA were site-specifically conjugated to the $Z_{HER2:2395}$ Affibody molecule having a C-terminal cysteine and labeled with ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In. All labeled conjugates retained specificity to HER2 in vitro. Most of the cell-associated activity was membrane-bound with a minor difference in internalization rate. All variants demonstrated specific targeting of xenografts and a high tumor uptake. The xenografts were clearly visualized using all conjugates. The influence of chelator on the biodistribution and targeting properties was much less pronounced for ^{68}Ga than for ^{111}In. The tumor uptake of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and tumor-to-blood ratios at 2 h p.i. did not differ significantly. However, the tumor-to-liver ratio was significantly higher for ^{68}Ga-NODAGA- $Z_{HER2:2395}$ (7.8±1.8 vs. 5.0±0.3) offering the advantage of better liver metastases visualization. In conclusion, influence of chelators on biodistribution of Affibody molecules depends on the radionuclides and re-optimization of labeling chemistry is required when a radionuclide label is changed.

INTRODUCTION

Affibody molecules are small (7 kDa), phage-display derived affinity proteins, which have a substantial potential as imaging agents. [1] They can be selected to bind with high affinity against several cancer-associated molecular abnormalities.[1] Robustness of Affibody molecules permits labeling under harsh conditions. Their small size and high affinity provide good tumor targeting properties and favorable kinetics, therefore permitting acquisition of high contrast images a few hours after injection.[2] The anti-HER2 Affibody molecule $Z_{HER2:342}$ with high affinity (K_D=22 pM) has been developed earlier [3] and is the most studied representative of this class by now. HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor type 2) is a transmembrane receptor that is associated with malignant properties in several carcinomas. [4] Signaling of this receptor leads to rapid proliferation, increased motility and suppression of apoptosis. [4.] Targeting of the HER2 with the monoclonal antibody trastuzumab or a tyrosine kinase inhibitor lapatinib is one of the successful approaches to prolong survival of metastatic breast cancer patients.[5] Radionuclide molecular imaging of HER2 expression is non-invasive approach for selection of patients for HER2-targeted therapy. Preclinical data confirmed the utility of $Z_{HER2:342}$ derivatives in imaging of HER2-expressing tumours.[2] In clinics, radiolabeled Affibody molecules demonstrated the capacity of HER2 imaging in breast cancer metastases.[6,7] Currently, several Affibody molecules for visualization of such cancer-associated molecular targets as EGFR (epidermal growth factor receptor)[8], IGF1R (insulin-like growth factor 1 receptor)[9], HER3 (human epidermal growth factor receptor type 3)[10], and PDGFRβ (platelet derived growth factor receptor β)[11] are under preclinical evaluation.

The high sensitivity and quantification accuracy of PET would further enhance the utility of Affibody molecules for personalizing HER2-targeting therapy. This prompted the labeling of $Z_{HER2:342}$ and its derivatives with positron-emitting radionuclides. Labeling with ^{76}Br,[12] ^{124}I,[13] ^{64}Cu,[14] ^{68}Ga [15, 16] and ^{18}F [17, 18, 19] provided potential Affibody-based PET imaging agents.

Particularly, the generator-produced ^{68}Ga ($T_{1/2}$ = 68 min, E_{β}+max=1899 keV, 89% β+) is a promising candidate for labeling of Affibody molecules. The rapid kinetics of Affibody molecules are compatible with the short half-life of ^{68}Ga. Potential availability of ^{68}Ge/^{68}Ga generator in clinics might reduce costs and facilitate the production of PET tracers.

Previous data suggests that the labeling chemistry has a profound influence on the tumor targeting properties of Affibody molecules. Small changes in the physicochemical properties of Affibody molecules resulted in modification of the in vivo properties of the tracer, including blood clearance rate, liver uptake, renal retention and route of excretion [2]. These effects were observed when different chelators and even when the same chelator with different radionuclides were used for labelling of Affibody molecules.[15, 20-22] We have shown earlier that the use of ^{68}Ga provides higher tumor-to-organ ratios than ^{111}In, when synthetic Affibody molecules were labeled using DOTA conjugated to the N-terminus,[15] or when recombinantly produced Affibody molecules were labeled using maleimido derivatives of NOTA at C-terminus.[18] Recently, we investigated the influence the maleimido derivative of the NODAGA chelator had on the targeting properties of ^{111}In-labelled $Z_{HER2:2395}$ (a variant of anti-HER2 $Z_{HER2:342}$ Affibody molecule having a unique C-terminal cysteine).[22] NODAGA was site-specifically conjugated to $Z_{HER2:2395}$ using a thiol-directed chemistry and labeled with ^{111}In. ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ demonstrated rapid clearance from the blood with lower uptake in normal organs compared to both DOTA- and NOTA-conjugated counterparts. [20, 22] Despite the lower tumor uptake observed, the NODAGA-conjugated variant exhibited the highest tumor-to-organ ratios among all three variants. Superiority of ^{68}Ga-labelled NODAGA-conjugated peptides over their DOTA-conjugated analogues has been reported for somatostatin analogues [23, 24] and RGD peptides. [25, 26] One might expect that the use of maleimido derivative of NODAGA instead of DOTA would also improve the imaging properties of ^{68}Ga –labelled Affibody molecules.

The goals of this study were:

a) to perform a comparative evaluation of recombinantly produced anti-HER2 $Z_{HER2:2395}$ Affibody molecule containing a C-terminal cysteine labelled with ^{68}Ga using maleimido derivatives of NODAGA and DOTA (**Fig. 1**) (designated as ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, respectively);

b) to evaluate if the targeting properties of ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ can be used for prediction of the ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ properties.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Conjugation and labeling chemistry

Maleimidomonoamido derivatives of NODAGA and DOTA (**Fig.1**) were conjugated to $Z_{HER2:2395}$ Affibody molecule having C-terminal cysteine using a site-specific thiol-directed chemistry as described earlier.[22, 27] Affinity of the conjugates to HER2 were 67 pM and 74 pM for NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, respectively.[22] ^{68}Ge/^{68}Ga generator (Eckert and Ziegler) was eluted with 0.1 M hydrochloric acid (prepared from 30% ultrapure HCl from Merck). The generator was pre-eluted 3 h before the labeling. The generator was eluted with 500 µl fractions of 0.1 M HCl. Fraction 3 containing the maximum radioactivity (~ 60%) was used for labeling.

For labeling with ^{68}Ga, solutions of DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (50 µg, 7 nmol) in 60 µL 1.25 M sodium acetate, pH 3.6, were mixed with 167 µL ^{68}Ga-containing eluate (195-270 MBq). The mixture was incubated at 90°C. Fifteen minutes after start of incubation, a small aliquot (~1 µL) of reaction mixture was taken and analysed by radio-ITLC (150-771 DARK GREEN, Tec-Control Chromatography strips, Biodex Medical Systems) eluted with 0.2 M citric acid. The ITLC was cross-validated by SDS-PAGE (4-16 % bis-tris gel, 200 V constant) as described earlier.[15] The stability of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was evaluated by challenge with 500-fold excess of EDTA as described earlier.[15]

Labeling of NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ with ^{111}In was performed as described earlier.[22, 27]

In vitro studies

Specificity of both ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ binding to HER2-expressing cells was evaluated using ovarian carcinoma SKOV3 (1.6×10^6 receptors/cell) [28] and prostate carcinoma DU-145 (5×10^4 receptors/cell)[29] cell lines purchased from American Type Tissue Culture Collection (ATCC).

An in vitro specificity test was performed according to the methods described earlier. [22] Briefly, a 1 nM solution of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ or ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was added to six Petri dishes (ca. 10^6 cells in each). For blocking, a 500-fold excess of non-labeled recombinant Affibody molecule was added 5 min before the labeled conjugates to saturate the receptors. The cells were incubated during 1 h in a humidified incubator at 37°C. Thereafter, the media was collected, the cells were detached by trypsin-EDTA solution and the radioactivity in cells and media was measured to calculate a percentage of cell-bound radioactivity.

A study concerning cellular processing of both conjugates labeled with ^{68}Ga by SKOV3 and DU-145 cells was performed according to the method developed and validated by Wållberg and Orlova.[30] The cells were incubated with 1 nM solution of the labeled compound at 37°C. At predetermined time points (0.5, 1, 2, and 3 h), cell-bound and internalized radioactivity were determined by an acid wash method. The cells were treated with 0.2 M glycine buffer containing 4 M urea, pH 2.0, for 5 min on ice. The radioactivity in the acid wash fraction was considered as membrane-bound radioactivity. Thereafter, the cells were lysed using 1 M NaOH, and the alkaline fraction was collected. This fraction of radioactivity was considered as internalized. The radioactivity of the samples was measured using an automated γ-counter, and data were normalized to the maximum uptake.

***In vivo* studies:**

The goal of the experiments was a comparative evaluation of the influence of ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In labels on biodistribution and targeting properties of MMA-derivatives of DOTA and NODAGA conjugated to $Z_{HER2:2395}$. All animal experiments were planned and performed in accordance with national legislation on laboratory animals' protection and were approved by the Local Ethics Committee for Animal Research. In order to reduce the number of animals in the experiments, a dual-label approach was used, i.e. ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In-labelled NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ were co-injected in the same mice. The same approach was used with the other conjugate DOTA- $Z_{HER2:2395}$. Gamma-spectra of each sample were recorded and uptake of ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In were determined by resolving gamma-spectra as it was described earlier.[15]

Comparison of tumor targeting was performed in female BALB/c nu/nu mice (15 weeks old, weight 20±1 g) carrying SKOV3 ovarian carcinoma xenografts. Cells (10^7 cells per mouse) were implanted subcutaneously on the right hind leg 3 weeks before the experiment. At the time of injection, the average tumor weight was 100 mg. Eleven mice were injected with a mixture of 10 kBq ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and 350 kBq ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ in 100 µL PBS each. Another group of eleven mice were injected with a mixture of 10 kBq ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and 350 kBq ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ in 100 µL PBS each. The total amount of injected protein was adjusted to 1 µg (0.14 nmol) per animal by non-labeled Affibody molecule. At 1 h and 2 h post-injection (p.i.), a group of four mice was sacrificed and dissected. The mice were euthanized at predetermined time points by an intraperitoneal injection of Ketalar-Rompun solution (20 µL of solution/g body weight: Ketalar, 10 mg/mL; Rompun, 1 mg/mL) followed by heart puncture with a heparinised syringe. Blood and organ samples were collected, weighed and the radioactivity measured as described above. The organ uptake values were calculated as per cent of injected dose per gram of tissue (%ID/g),

except for the gastrointestinal tract and the remaining carcass, which were calculated as %ID per whole sample. To check the specificity of xenograft targeting, groups of three mice were subcutaneously pre-injected (neck area) with 500 μg (70 nmol) non-labeled recombinant $Z_{HER2:342}$ affibody molecule before injecting ^{111}In/^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ or ^{111}In/^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ mixture. The control groups were sacrificed at 2 h p.i.

Imaging

To confirm the capacity of the conjugates to visualize HER2-expressing tumors an in vivo imaging experiment was performed. For this purpose, four SKOV-3 xenograft bearing mice were separately injected with 1.1 MBq ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (amount of peptide 1 μg) or with 5 MBq ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395,}$ respectively (amount of peptide 5 μg). Immediately before imaging, the animals were sacrificed and the urine bladders were excised.

All SPECT/CT and PET/CT studies were performed in The Triumph™ Trimodality system (Gamma Medica, Inc) a fully integrated SPECT/PET/CT hardware and software platform optimized for small animals in pre-clinical applications. Images were acquired 1h p.i. for both the SPECT and PET tracers. SPECT raw data was reconstructed by FLEX^{TM} SPECT software which uses an ordered Subset Expectation Maximization (OSEM) iterative reconstruction algorithm for its pinhole reconstruction. CT raw files were reconstructed by Filter Back Projection (FBP). SPECT/PET and CT data were fused and analysed in PMOD (PMOD Technologies Ltd.).

RESULTS

Labeling

Labeling with ^{68}Ga was successful under the selected conditions and the average yield was above 95% (range 96-99%).The SDS-PAGE confirmed the identity and purity of ^{68}Ga-labelled conjugates (**Fig. 2)**.

Stability of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was evaluated by challenge with 500-fold molar excess EDTA at room temperature with subsequent ITLC analysis. The EDTA challenge demonstrated very high labeling stability. The radiochemical purity of treated samples was 99.4±0.3%, while the purity of the untreated control was 99.7% for ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, and 99% for both treated and untreated ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, i.e. the difference was within the accuracy of the analytical method.

In vitro studies

Binding specificity tests demonstrated that the binding of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ to living HER2-expressing cells was receptor-mediated, because pre-saturation of the receptors by non-labeled Affibody molecule significantly decreased the binding of the radiolabelled Affibody molecule (for both studied cell lines, $p<0.0001$) (**Table 1**). The level of cell-associated radioactivity was appreciably lower for non-blocked DU-145 cell line than for SKOV3 cell line, reflecting the lower expression level of HER2.

Data concerning cellular processing of ^{68}Ga-labeled NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ are presented in **Fig. 3**. All conjugates demonstrated similar processing pattern typical for $Z_{HER2:342}$ and its derivatives. The internalization rate of both conjugates was slow, but internalized radioactivity was increasing throughout the duration of the study. There were,

however, some chelator-related differences in internalized radioactivity. In the case of ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, 21.4±4% of radioactivity was internalized at 3 h, while the corresponding value for ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was only 10±3% in the low HER2-expressing DU145 cell line. In contrast, results from the high HER2 expressing SKOV3 cell lines revealed similar internalization for ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (11±0.6% vs. 9±1.6% respectively).

***In vivo* studies**

The data concerning biodistribution of ^{68}Ga and ^{111}In labeled NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ in female BALB/C nu/nu mice bearing SKOV3 xenografts are presented in **Table 2 and Fig. 4**. All conjugates demonstrated highly specific tumor uptake. Pre-saturation of HER2 in tumors by pre-injection of non-labeled $Z_{HER2:342}$ caused significant ($p<0.001\%$) reduction of radioactivity accumulation in xenografts for all four conjugates (**Fig. 4**). Pre-blocking did not cause significant differences in radioactivity concentration in normal organs and tissues (data not shown). The tumor uptake values for ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ were close to each other (no significant difference), the uptake of ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ at both time points was approximately twice lower. All conjugates demonstrated rapid blood clearance and an overall low uptake in non-excretory organs. The low radioactivity level in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract indicated that the hepatobiliary pathway played a minor role in the excretion of all conjugates. The kidney radioactivity was high for all conjugates indicating predominantly renal excretion with subsequent re-absorption of conjugates in the proximal tubuli.

There were clear chelator and nuclide-dependent differences in the biodistribution pattern of the conjugates. The most pronounced was the difference between ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and other conjugates. ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ demonstrated significantly more rapid clearance providing significantly lower radioactivity uptake in lung, liver, kidney, gastrointestinal tract and carcass. The renal accumulation of ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was more than two-fold lower in comparison with all other conjugates. The difference between uptake of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ at 2 h p.i. was significant only in liver and spleen.

The data concerning tumor-to-organ ratios are presented in **Fig. 5**. ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ provided at 2h after injection significantly higher tumor-to-liver (8±2 vs. 5.0±0.4) and tumor-to-spleen (18±4 vs. 13±1) ratios than ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$. Remarkably, the difference between ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was much more pronounced, and ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ provided significantly higher tumor-to-blood, tumor-to-lung, tumor-to-liver, tumor-to-spleen and tumor-to-bone ratios.

Images acquired 1h after the i.v. injection for the four conjugates into mice bearing SKOV3 xenografts confirmed the capacity of radiolabeled $Z_{HER2:2395}$ derivatives to visualize HER2 expression (**Fig. 6**). In agreement with the biodistribution data, a prominent radioactivity uptake was observed in kidneys. No noticeable accumulation of radioactivity in other healthy organs and tissues was observed.

DISCUSSION

The use of PET should further increase the sensitivity of imaging using Affibody molecules. This is essential for visualization of small metastases. Emerging production of GMP-grade ^{68}Ga generators suggests that the use of ^{68}Ga as a label might be a way of clinical implementation of Affibody-based PET. Earlier, a number of Affibody variants conjugated with macrocyclic chelators were labeled with ^{111}In and characterized pre-clinically. These previous studies have demonstrated that both the chemical nature of chelator and conjugation linker, as well as the site of its conjugation to the Affibody molecule influence substantially the clearance rate of conjugates from blood, and their uptake in normal tissues and in tumours.[20-22, 31] This opens a way to improve targeting. As much as two-fold increase of tumor-to-blood and tumor-to-organ ratios might be gained by optimization of the chelator nature and position in the case of ^{111}In.[20-22, 31] One might consider that substitution of ^{111}In with ^{68}Ga in such conjugates could be a straightforward approach requiring only some re-optimization of labeling conditions. However, although both gallium and indium are trivalent metals, they differ appreciably in coordination geometry [32] resulting in different physicochemical properties of chelates. While difference in biodistribution of ^{111}In and ^{68}Ga-labeled short peptides is quite well studied, [23, 33, 34] only limited information is available for Affibody molecules.[15,18] In this study, we evaluated Affibody molecules site-specifically coupled at the C-terminus with two different chelators (DOTA and NODAGA) through thiol-directed chemistry. The conjugates are labeled with ^{68}Ga and compared in a dual-isotope study with ^{111}In.

This study demonstrates that conjugation of maleimido derivatives of DOTA and NODAGA to a unique cysteine at the C-terminus permits site-specific and stable labeling of Affibody molecules with ^{68}Ga. These tracers preserved the capacity to specifically bind HER2-

expressing cells in vitro (**Table 1**). The internalization assay of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ showed that internalization rate is slow **(Fig. 3)**, which is typical for anti-HER2 Affibody molecules. [15,18, 27] Interestingly, the internalization by SKOV-3 cells (high HER2 expression) had nearly equal rate for both conjugates (11±1 vs 9±2% after 3 h incubation). However, this was not the case in DU145 cells (low HER2 expression), where ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ demonstrated a two-fold higher internalized fraction compared to ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (21±4 vs 11±3%, respectively). Earlier, we have found that binding of anti-HER2 Affibody molecules to HER2-receptors on DU145 (but not on SKOV3 cell) in vitro might be influenced by co-expression with EGFR, presumably by heterodimerization.[35] It is possible that binding of ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ influences differently heterodimerization of HER2 and EGFR on DU-145 cells, which might explain difference in internalization rate.

Both ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ targeted HER2-expressing xenografts in mice specifically (**Fig.4**) and were capable to visualize HER2-expressing xenografts with high contrast already at 1 h after injection (**Fig.6**). However, the tumor-to-organ ratios for both conjugates increased appreciably by 2 h after injection (**Fig. 5**). It would make sense to perform imaging at 2 h in clinical practice to visualize small metastases with higher contrast. The 68-min half-life of ^{68}Ga would permit this. Importantly, the biodistribution properties of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ provided significantly higher tumor-to-liver and tumor-to-spleen ratios in comparison with ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$. Thus, the use of maleimido derivative of NODAGA for labeling of Affibody molecules with ^{68}Ga may improve detection of liver metastases. This is important, as liver is a frequent metastatic site for a number of HER2-expressing cancers, including breast carcinoma.[36]

It has to be noted that the biodistribution pattern of ^{111}In-labeled Affibody molecules was not quite predictive for the biodistribution of ^{68}Ga-labelled counterparts. Uptake of both ^{68}Ga-labelled tracers in liver and spleen was significantly higher than ^{111}In-labelled. Further, the uptake of ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was significantly lower than uptake of ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ in the majority of tissues, including tumors and kidneys. These results were concordant with our previous data for targeting of DU145 with low HER2 expression,[22] although the magnitude of the effect was different, presumably due to differences in mouse strain, sex and HER2-expression level in xenografts. Particularly, previous studies [37] have demonstrated that clearance of Affibody molecules from blood is slower in the case of high HER2 expression in tumors, most likely because tumors act as depot for reversibly bound conjugates. The difference in ^{68}Ga-labelled Affibody molecules uptake was limited to liver and spleen. Overall, while DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ provided the best tumor-to-organ ratios for ^{111}In label in the model with high HER2 expression, NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ was the best for ^{68}Ga. Interestingly, earlier study has shown that for synthetic Affibody molecule labeled via DOTA conjugated to N-terminus using amide bond, ^{68}Ga provides equal liver uptake with ^{111}In. [15] In this study, uptake of ^{68}Ga was twice higher than ^{111}In. This indicates that both position of a chelator in Affibody molecules and conjugation chemistry might influence biodistribution profile of the imaging agent. Thus assessment of different combinations of radionuclides and chelators is necessary for optimization of scaffold-protein-based imaging agents. Currently, several Affibody molecules are under development as imaging agents for other cancer-associated molecular targets (e.g. EGFR, IGF-1R, PDGFRβ).[1] Moreover, several other scaffold proteins with similar size are evaluated as probes for radionuclide molecular imaging.[38] Our finding should be useful for the development of such probes.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that selection of chelators influences biodistribution and imaging properties of Affibody molecules. The use of maleimido derivative of NODAGA instead of DOTA permits an increase of tumor-to-liver and tumor-to-spleen ratios of ^{68}Ga-labelled Affibody molecules in case of placement of the label at C-terminus. This can be essential for PET visualization of e.g. small liver metastases. The influence of chelators depends of radionuclides used as labels. Thus, biodistribution data obtained for a scaffold protein conjugate using one nuclide cannot be used for exact prediction of behavior of the same conjugate labeled with another one. This is essential information for the development of imaging conjugates based on scaffold proteins.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Tables

Table 1. Specificity of binding of gallium-68 labeled Affibody molecules to HER2-expressing cells in vitro. The test was performed using the DU-145 prostate cancer and the SKOV-3 ovarian cancer cell lines. For pre-saturation of antigens, a 500-fold molar excess of unlabeled Affibody molecule was added. Data are presented as mean values from three cell dishes with standard deviations.

	Cell-associated radioactivity (% of added)			
	DU-145		SKOV-3	
Conjugate	non-blocked	blocked	non-blocked	blocked
^{68}Ga-NODAGA-Z_{2395}	11.6±0.7	0.09±0.16	47.7±1.9	1.2±0.3
^{68}Ga-DOTA-Z_{2395}	10.5±1.1	0.4±0.1	41.5±1.4	2.8±0.6

Table 2. Comparative biodistribution of NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ labeled with gallium-68 and indium-111 after intravenous injection in female BALB/C nu/nu mice bearing SKOV-3 xenografts. Data are presented as an average % ID/g and standard deviation for four mice.

Uptake, 1 h pi				
conjugate	^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$	^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$	^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$	^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$
blood	1.8±0.2[a]	1.2±0.2	1.2±0.1[c]	1.2±0.1
lung	2.9±0.2 [a]	2.0±0.1	2.1±0.2[c]	2.8±1.2
liver	2.5±0.1[a]	1.52±0.08 [d]	3.2±0.4	1.8±0.1[b]
spleen	1.6±0.3[a]	1.0±0.2	1.8±0.3	1.1±0.2[b]
kidney	310±5[a]	122±1[d]	280±19	284±22
tumour	14.5±7.8[a]	7.2±3.2[d]	14.7±1.5	16.4±1.8
muscle	0.44±0.33[a]	0.33±0.04	0.35±0.06	0.37±0.07
bone	1.6±0.3	1.5±0.1[d]	0.8±0.1[c]	0.72±0.09
GI tract*	1.4±0.1	1.33±0.27	1.21±0.14	1.6±0.4
carcass*	12±3[a]	12±4	8.8±0.4	13±4
Uptake, 2 h pi				
blood	0.5±0.1	0.3±0.1	0.42±0.07	0.35±0.04
lung	1.0±0.3	0.7±0.1 [d]	0.85±0.09	0.84±0.05
liver	2.0±0.3[a]	1.2±0.2[d]	3.06±0.12[c]	1.65±0.05[b]
spleen	0.9±0.1	0.6±0.1	1.2±0.2[c]	0.60±0.03[b]
kidney	297±33[a]	118±13[d]	303±28	313±26
tumour	15.6±3.4[a]	8.0±1.8[d]	15.3±1.4	17.1±1.6
muscle	0.14±0.03	0.12±0.09	0.17±0.03	0.18±0.06
bone	0.5±0.1	0.7±0.5	0.6±0.2	0.4±0.1
GI tract *	0.7±0.2	0.6±0.1 [d]	0.72±0.05	0.8±0.1
carcass*	4.6±1.3	4.4±0.23 [d]	4.6±0.5	6.2±1.0[b]

*Data for gastrointestinal (GI) tract and carcass are presented as %ID per whole sample.

a Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-Z_{2395} and ^{111}In-NODAGA-Z_{2395}

b Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between ^{68}Ga-DOTA-Z_{2395} and ^{111}In-DOTA-Z_{2395}

c Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-Z_{2395} and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-Z_{2395}

[d] Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between ^{111}In-NODAGA-$Z_{2395}$and ^{111}In-DOTA-Z_{2395}

Figure Legends

Fig 1 Structure of maleimidomonoamido derivatives of NODAGA (left) and DOTA (right).

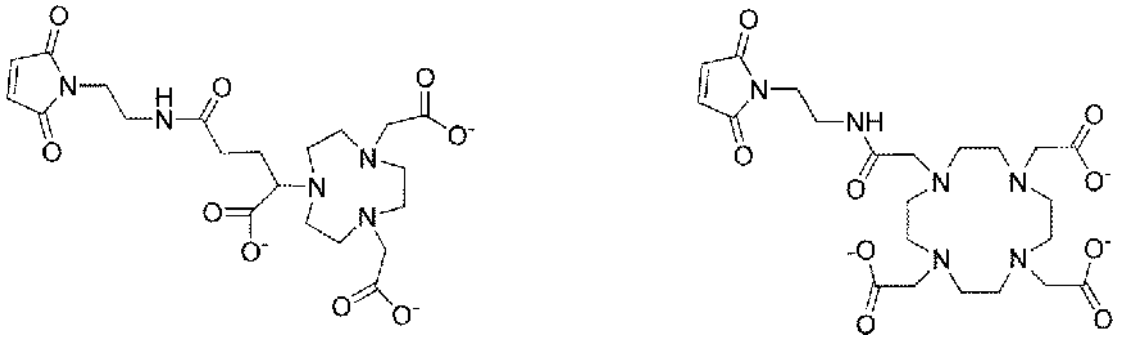

Fig 2 SDS-PAGE analysis of ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$. Distribution of radioactivity along lanes was visualized and quantified using Cyclone™ Storage Phosphor System. **1** ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ sample. **2** ^{68}Ga-acetate sample, which was used as a marker for low molecular weight compounds and free gallium-68.

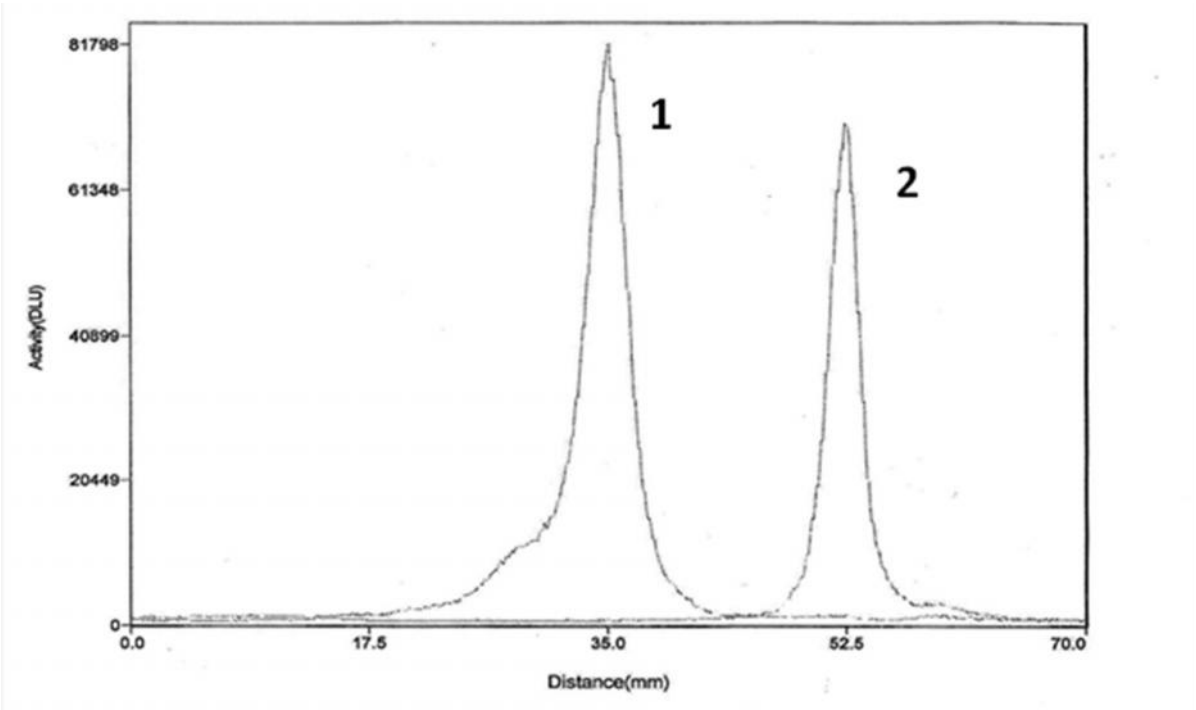

Fig 3 Cell-associated radioactivity as a function of time during continuous incubation of HER2-expressing DU-145 (upper row) and SKOV-3 (lower row) cells with ^{68}Ga labeled Affibody molecules. Data are presented as an average value from 3 dishes ± standard deviation and normalized to the maximum uptake. Error bars might not be seen because they are smaller than the point symbols.

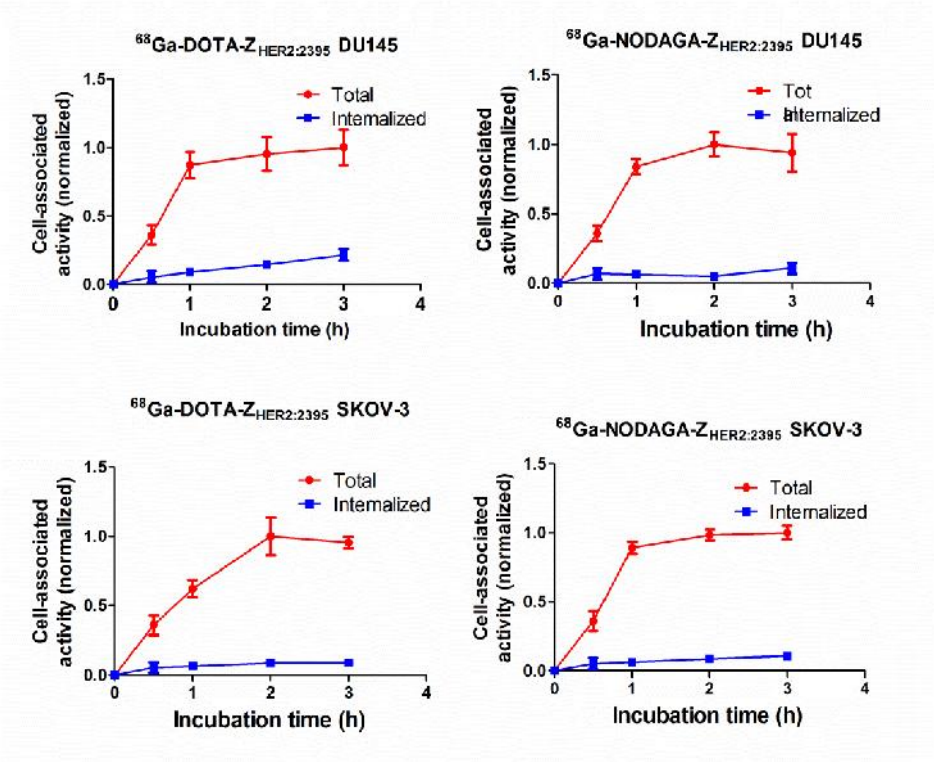

Fig 4 In vivo targeting specificity of ^{68}Ga- and ^{111}In-labelled Affibody molecules in mice bearing SKOV-3 xenografts at 2 h p.i. The blocked group was subcutaneously pre-injected with an excess amount of non-labeled Affibody molecule. Results are presented as percentage of injected activity per gram of tissue (% IA/g).

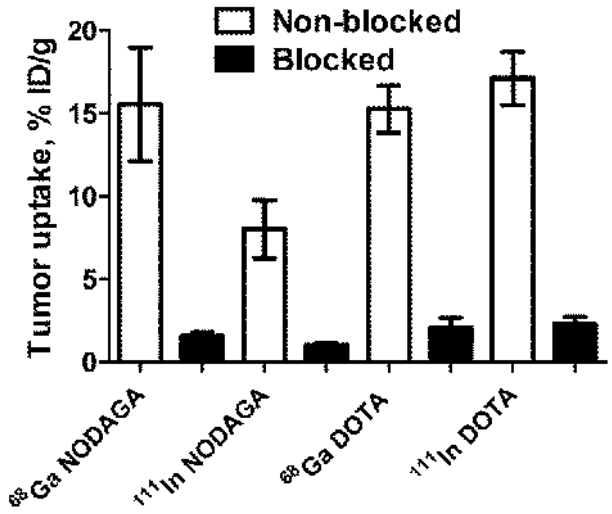

Fig 5 Comparison of tumor-to-organ ratios 1 and 2 h p.i. for ^{68}Ga-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{111}In-DOTA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$, ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ and ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ in mice bearing SKOV-3 xenografts. Data are presented as an average % ID/g and standard deviation for four mice.

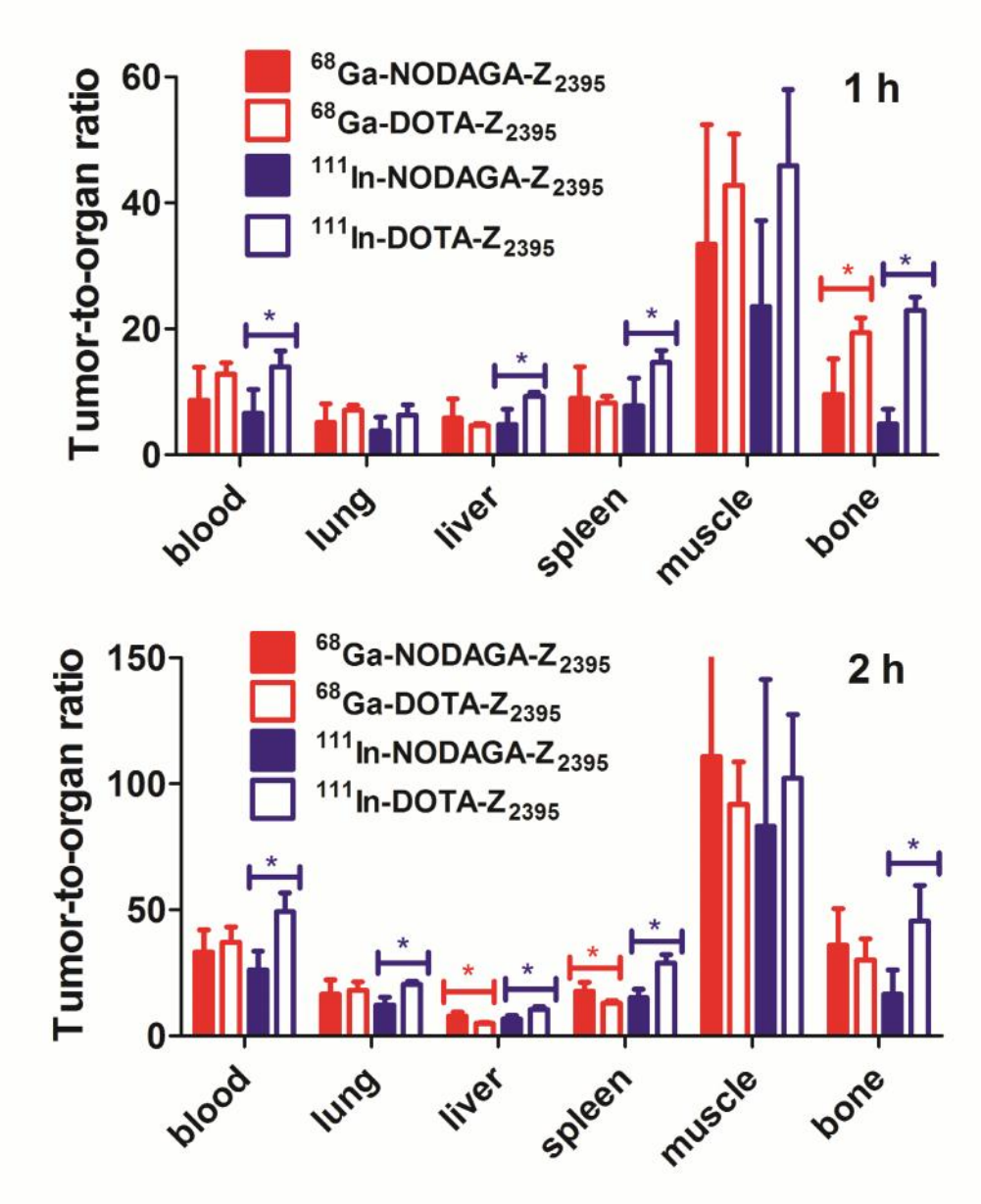

Fig 6 Imaging of HER2 expression in SKOV-3 ovarian cancer xenografts in BALB/C nu/nu mice taken 1 h after injection with ^{111}In-DOTA-MMA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (A) and ^{111}In-NODAGA-MMA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (B) using fused SPECT/CT and ^{68}Ga-DOTA-MMA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ (C) and ^{68}Ga-NODAGA-MMA-$Z_{HER2:2395}$ using fused PET/CT (D). Arrows show tumor (T) and kidneys (K) in one representative animal.