

Development of a Refined Database of Relative Potency Estimates to Facilitate Better Characterization of Variability and Uncertainty in the Current Mammalian TEFs for PCDDs, PCDFs, and Dioxin-like PCBs

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Introduction

The toxic equivalency factor (TEF) approach has been widely accepted as the most feasible and plausible method presently available for evaluating potential health risks associated with exposure to mixtures of polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins (PCDDs), polychlorinated dibenzofurans (PCDFs), and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)^{1,2,3,4,5,6}. In accordance with this approach, the relative potency of each congener is expressed as some fraction of the potency of 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD). The current TEFs for PCDDs, PCDFs, and dioxin-like PCBs were established by the World Health Organization (WHO) following the meeting of an international expert panel in June of 1997². In the course of their review, the WHO expert panel examined data from an extensive body of *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies that had been compiled into a database of relative potency (REP) values by scientists at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden (hereafter referred to as the Karolinska database). As the database was intended to be all-inclusive, data were taken from published manuscripts, manuscripts in press, conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, and unpublished studies. Studies were determined to be suitable for inclusion in the database when the following criteria were met: 1) at least one test congener (PCDD, PCDF, or PCB) and a reference compound (tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin [TCDD] or PCB126) were included in the study or the reference compound (TCDD or PCB126) was from an identical experiment by the same authors; and 2) the relevant endpoint used as the basis for the REP was affected by the test congener, as well as by the reference compound. An effort was also made to include information in the Karolinska database regarding a number of specific study elements. Consensus-based TEF values were established by the WHO expert panel based on

scientific judgment, after consideration of the mammalian data in the Karolinska database and previously published TEFs². Specifically, as mammalian TEFs had been previously established for PCDD/Fs^{5,7} and dioxin-like PCBs⁸, it was decided by the WHO expert panel that the existing TEFs would remain unchanged unless there was sufficient information to warrant modification². The final TEFs recommended by the WHO expert panel represent order-of-magnitude estimates of potency of each congener relative to the most potent member of this class of compounds, TCDD.

The WHO TEFs are currently used by numerous governmental agencies and others to regulate or otherwise assess health risks associated with exposure to PCDD/Fs and dioxin-like PCBs in foods, consumer products, and environmental media. As has been noted by others, for any given congener, the underlying REP values typically represent a heterogeneous data set, and the range of REPs often spans several orders of magnitude^{2,9,10,11,12}. It would therefore be helpful to better understand the degree to which the TEF values contribute to variability and uncertainty in the risk assessment process. As such, the goal of this project was to develop a database that will better characterize the range of REPs, allow for the development and application of quantitative weighting schemes, and facilitate quantitative analyses. This in turn will allow for better characterization of variability and uncertainty inherent in the mammalian TEFs. The development of this database was necessary since the Karolinska database was not intentionally designed or annotated in such a way as to allow for characterization of the variability and uncertainty associated with the current consensus-based TEFs. The analysis reported herein describes our efforts with regard to the development of a refined REP database. We also provide recommendations regarding possible next steps for developing and interpreting a refined REP database for risk assessment purposes.

Methods

An electronic copy of the Karolinska database was obtained from Dr. Fredrik Waern with the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. The Karolinska database contained information on the relative potency of laterally-substituted PCDDs and PCDFs, as well as the dioxin-like PCBs. It is important to note that although the Karolinska database contains REP data for fish, birds, and mammals, the focus of our current effort was to develop a refined database of mammalian REPs as the mammalian data serves as the basis for the TEFs that are ultimately used for human health risk assessment purposes.

The initial phase of this project involved obtaining copies of all of the original *in vivo* and *in vitro* mammalian studies cited in the Karolinska database. Next, a determination was made regarding the specific study elements that were likely to be important metrics of study quality and reliability. The specific study elements that were determined to be important in this context included the following: cell culture system, route of administration, chemical purity, exposure duration, delay between treatment and measurement of response, measurement endpoint, species/strain, tissue type, number of dose levels tested, attainment of a maximal response, method of REP derivation, vehicle, animal age and sex, number of animals per treatment group, controls, and the reference compound included in the study (TCDD vs. PCB-126)¹³. With a few exceptions (i.e., delay between treatment and measurement of effect, attainment of a maximal response, and controls), information concerning these study elements is contained in the original Karolinska database. The Karolinska database was then reviewed to determine whether the information in the database regarding the aforementioned study elements and associated REP values was consistent with that in

each of the original *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies. Information regarding specific study elements was then updated or corrected as necessary in the refined database. The Karolinska database was refined further by eliminating or modifying individual REP values based on decision criteria described herein. Such refinements were determined to be necessary as our goal is to develop a comprehensive database that can be used for the development and application of quantitative weighting schemes, as well as facilitate quantitative analyses.

Results and Discussion

There are a total of 1,012 mammalian REP values in the original Karolinska database. Of these, 171 values (17%) are qualified as “<” or “>” some specified value, rather than being a specific estimate. The majority of these qualified REP values (94% or 159 REP values) were for the PCB congeners. Further, only 3% (or 12 out of 171 values) of all PCDD/F REP values were qualified, whereas 24% (or 159 out of 171 values) of all PCB REP values were qualified.

Our audit of all of the mammalian data in the Karolinska database identified a substantial number of REP values that either could not be used in a quantitative analysis or were questionable or clearly invalid. Table 1 summarizes the different bases for excluding REP values in the development of a refined database. There were three primary bases for exclusion: 1) values excluded due to procedural errors (e.g., data entry errors, multiple entries of the same REP value published in different studies, etc.); 2) values excluded because they did not meet the original WHO selection criteria (e.g., lack of a reference compound, use of non-mammalian data, lack of a response, etc.); and 3) values excluded for other, more subjective reasons (e.g., values derived from a quantitative structure activity relationship [QSAR] data or a mixtures study, values were derived from unpublished studies that were unobtainable, multiple REPs from a single study that used different assays to measure the same response, etc.). With regard to the latter category, it is possible that some might view a number of the excluded data as being valid and useful, while others might conceive of additional categories for exclusion based on professional judgment.

Table 1: Bases for Removing REP Values

| Basis for Omission |
|--|
| REP qualified as “>” or “<” some specified value |
| Multiplicative entries of the same REP published in different studies |
| REP omitted in final peer-reviewed publication |
| REP not valid due to solubility limitations |
| REP and associated data are actually for another congener |
| Congener not evaluated in the study |
| Endpoint not evaluated for the test congener |
| REP based on replicates in an <i>in vitro</i> study |
| REP based on non-mammalian species |
| Response for test or reference compound not statistically different from controls |
| Reference compound not included in study or in identical study from the same laboratory |
| Multiple REPs from a single study that used different assays to measure the same response (e.g., AHH and EROD) |
| REP based on QSAR |
| REP based on mixtures study |
| REP from an unpublished study that could not be obtained |

As indicated in Table 2, our refinement of the Karolinska database resulted in a substantial reduction in the total number of mammalian REPs, with only 58% and 49% of the PCDD/F and PCB REPs remaining following our audit, respectively. Overall, only 52% of all REP values were retained. On a congener-specific basis, 1234678-HpCDF had the greatest percentage of REP values eliminated, with only a single REP value from a single study being retained (Table 3). In addition, 50% or more of the REP values were removed for the following congeners: 123678-HxCDD, TCDF, 12378-PeCDF, 1234789-HpCDF, OCDF, PCB118, PCB123, PCB126, PCB157, and PCB189 (Tables 3 and 4). It is important to consider the number of REP values retained in the context of the number of studies. As is indicated in Tables 3 and 4, there are now several congeners in the refined database that only have a single REP value from a single study (i.e., 123789-HxCDF, 1234678-HpCDF, 1234789-HpCDF). This obviously has the potential to increase the uncertainty inherent in the TEF. In the refined database, the REP range for most PCDD/F congeners was reduced by approximately an order of magnitude, while the REP range for most PCB congeners remained essentially the same.

Table 2
Comparison of the Karolinska and Refined Databases:
Impact on the Total Number of Mammalian REPs

| Class of Congeners | Karolinska Database | Refined Database |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| PCDD/Fs | 361 | 209 |
| PCBs | 651 | 317 |
| Total | 1012 | 526 |

It is important to note that there were also a significant number of errors and incomplete entries identified for specific study elements described in the Karolinska database (e.g., information concerning purity, number of dose levels, cell culture system, etc.). In addition, the data for a number of studies were preliminary at the time of the WHO expert panel meeting but have since been published in full. In several instances, the REP values and associated study characteristics have been modified in the final publications. Therefore, where appropriate, we corrected and updated the REP values and associated study-element information in the refined database.

Table 3
Comparison of the Karolinska and Refined Databases:
Impact on REPs for PCDD/PCDF Congeners

| Congener | Karolinska Database | | Refined Database | | REP Values Retained |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | # REPs | # Studies | # REPs | # Studies | |
| 12378PeCDD | 52 | 18 | 29 | 14 | 56% |
| 123478HxCDD | 10 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 80% |
| 123678HxCDD | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 50% |
| 123789HxCDD | 6 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 67% |
| 1234678HpCDD | 23 | 9 | 20 | 9 | 87% |
| OCDD | 15 | 5 | 8 | 3 | 53% |
| TCDF | 51 | 20 | 25 | 12 | 49% |
| 12378PeCDF | 42 | 14 | 21 | 9 | 50% |
| 23478PeCDF | 74 | 23 | 49 | 19 | 66% |
| 123478HxCDF | 18 | 6 | 11 | 4 | 61% |
| 123678HxCDF | 19 | 6 | 12 | 4 | 63% |
| 123789HxCDF | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 100% |
| 234678HxCDF | 12 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 58% |
| 1234678HpCDF | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 20% |
| 1234789HpCDF | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 50% |
| OCDF | 21 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 33% |
| TOTAL | 361 | NA | 209 | NA | 58% |

We suggest that some form of a refined REP database ultimately be developed for use in risk assessment applications. The analysis presented here provides one possible methodology for developing such a database; certainly other approaches might be equally valid. At the very least, the obvious data entry errors and multiplicative entries of the same values should be corrected. Values that clearly fall short of established selection criteria or that otherwise appear to be questionable should also be candidates for elimination or some form of diminished weighting. In addition, it is important to be aware of the heterogeneous nature of the REP data, particularly with respect to data quality and relevance. Development of a quantitative, transparent, and reproducible weighting scheme for individual REP values would likely increase consistency in the derivation of the TEF values, facilitate characterization of uncertainty, and could also be used to evaluate new REP data as they become available. The availability of a refined database, like the one that we have described in this paper, will allow for the development and application of quantitative weighting schemes and facilitate quantitative analyses.

Table 4
Comparison of the Karolinska and Refined Databases:
Impact on the REPs for PCB Congeners

| Congener | Karolinska Database | | Refined Database | | REP Values Retained |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | # REPs | # Studies | # REPs | # Studies | |
| PCB77 | 83 | 34 | 57 | 27 | 69% |
| PCB81 | 13 | 6 | 8 | 5 | 62% |
| PCB105 | 67 | 22 | 35 | 16 | 52% |
| PCB114 | 17 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 59% |
| PCB118 | 55 | 18 | 24 | 14 | 44% |
| PCB123 | 24 | 5 | 9 | 5 | 37% |
| PCB126 | 164 | 40 | 62 | 27 | 38% |
| PCB156 | 91 | 29 | 47 | 24 | 52% |
| PCB157 | 34 | 10 | 13 | 7 | 38% |
| PCB167 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 60% |
| PCB169 | 73 | 25 | 39 | 18 | 53% |
| PCB189 | 20 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 35% |
| TOTAL | 651 | NA | 317 | NA | 49% |

It might also be useful to develop REP distributions as a supplement to and/or in the derivation of the “point-estimate” TEFs. For example, REP distributions could be used to establish a consistent percentile point-estimate TEF to represent the “central tendency” and “plausible upper bound” for each congener (e.g., the 50th and 90th percentiles of the distribution, respectively). In addition, use of REP distributions in a probabilistic analysis of risk would theoretically allow for a more informed discussion of the variability and uncertainty in the risk estimates

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the WHO has suggested that the TEF approach be reevaluated every 5 years to account for emerging scientific information². Given the findings presented here, as well as the significant number of new studies with relevant REP data that have likely been published since 1997, this may be an appropriate time to undertake such a review.

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