Tawfeek, HM, Khidr, SH, Samy, EM, Ahmed, SM, Gaskell, EE and Hutcheon, GA

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Evaluation of biodegradable polyester-co-lactone microparticles for protein delivery

Hesham M. Tawfeek1,2, Sayed H. Khidr2, Eman M. Samy2, Sayed M. Ahmed2, Elsie E. Gaskell1, and Gillian A. Hutcheon1

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Abstract
Polyglycerol adipate-co-o-pentadecalactone (PGA-co-PDL) was previously evaluated for the colloidal delivery of z-chymotrypsin. In this article, the effect of varying polymer molecular weight (Mw) and chemistry on particle size and morphology; encapsulation efficiency; in vitro release; and the biological activity of z-chymotrypsin (z-CH) and lysozyme (LS) were investigated. Microparticles were prepared using emulsion solvent evaporation and evaluated by various methods. Altering the Mw or monomer ratio of PGA-co-PDL did not significantly affect the encapsulation efficiency and overall poly(1,3-propanediol adipate-co-o-pentadecalactone) (PPA-co-PDL) demonstrated the highest encapsulation efficiency. In vitro release varied between polymers, and the burst release for z-CH-loaded microparticles was lower when a higher Mw PGA-co-PDL or more hydrophobic PPA-co-PDL was used. The results suggest that, although these co-polymers could be useful for protein delivery, little difference observed between the different PGA-co-PDL polymers and PPA-co-PDL generally provided a higher encapsulation and slower release of enzyme than the other polymers tested.

Introduction
Numerous protein and peptide pharmaceuticals such as recombinant human growth hormone, gaseserinacetate, leuprolide acetate and recombinant bovine somatropin have already received approval from regulating authorities worldwide. However, there are many difficulties associated with delivering biopharmaceutical drugs. The oral route of administration of proteins results in substantial degradation and poor bioavailability, therefore, parenteral delivery is usually preferred. However, proteins often exhibit short half-lives in serum, thus requiring frequent administration to maintain their plasma level. To prolong the therapeutic level of proteins, controlled release is required and this can be achieved using biodegradable polymers. A range of formulation methods have been utilized to encapsulate proteins in polymeric micro- and nanoparticles, but water-in-oil-in-water (w/o/w) emulsion solvent evaporation is the most frequently used method. Difficulties in the encapsulation of proteins are related to their high molecular weight (Mw), high water solubility and instability upon exposure to formulation conditions. An initial burst release followed by slow, incomplete release of the native protein as a result of protein instability and aggregation has also been recognized as a major problem. Interactions between the protein and the polymer also influence the release profile. These interactions are dependent on protein Mw; isoelectric point; amino acid composition; and hydrophobicity, as well as polymer Mw and chemistry. Polymer properties such as Mw, copolymer composition and crystallinity can also be tailored to alter polymer degradation and subsequent drug release profiles. For example, an increase in the Mw of Poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) resulted in longer degradation times and slower release of bovine serum albumin and tetanus toxid. Bovine serum albumin (BSA) and lysozyme (LS) were encapsulated using two different Mw of PLGA by (w/o/w) solvent extraction and oil-in-oil (o/o) solvent evaporation systems. BSA was efficiently encapsulated independently of PLGA Mw, whereas the encapsulation of LS was favored with low Mw PLGA.

Although the choice of polymer is critical, few new polymers have been developed for specific drug delivery applications, and mono- and copolymers of poly(lactic acid) (PLA) and poly(glycolic acid) (PGA) are commonly adopted due to their widespread availability and approval for human use. One alternative is to develop new polymeric delivery systems to release the protein and retain bioactivity over the required target period.

A family of biodegradable polyesters with backbone functionality, synthesized via the enzyme catalyzed transesterification of a combination of activated diacids, glycerol and lactone monomers has been designed to overcome the lack of chemical functionality of the commonly used polyesters. The free hydroxyl group from the glycerol monomer allows for the attachment of chemical moieties such as pharmaceutically active drugs, hence introducing the potential for the controlled incorporation and release of desired molecules. In addition, the physical characteristics (hydrophilicity and hydrophobicity) of these polymers can easily be manipulated by varying the
Polymer synthesis

The copolymers PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL were synthesized, processed and characterized using methods adapted from Thompson et al. 19 and further described by Gaskell et al. 19. Polymer M_w was varied by controlling the reaction time. Reaction times of 6, 18 and 24 h were used to prepare PGA-co-PDL (1:1), with a M_w of 11.4, 26.0 and 39.2 KDa, respectively. The ratio of divinyl adipate (DVA) and glycerol (1:1) to ω-pentadecalactone was varied to produce polymers theoretically containing 1:1:0.5 and 1:1:1.5 of DVA, glycerol and ω-pentadecalactone, respectively. Using the same reaction conditions, PPA-co-PDL with a M_w of 22.0 KDa was synthesized from a 1:1:1 molar ratio of DVA:1.3-propanediol:ω-pentadecalactone over 24 h.

The polymers were characterized by gel permeation chromatography, GPC (Viscotek TDA Model 300 run by OmnicISEC software precalibrated with polystyrene standards) and 1H-NMR spectroscopy (Bruker AVANCE 300 operated via XWIN-NMR v3.5). 1H-NMR (δ (CDCl₃, 300 MHz) PGA-co-PDL (1:1:0.5): 1.34 (s, 11H, H-g), 1.65 (m, 8H, H-e, e', h), 2.32 (m, 6H, H-d, d', i), 4.05 (q)-4.18 (m) (6H, H-a, b, c, f), 5.2 (s, H, H-j). PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1): 1.34 (s, 22H, H-g), 1.65 (m, 8H, H-e, e', h), 2.32 (m, 6H, H-d, d', i), 4.05 (q)-4.18 (m) (6H, H-a, b, c, f), 5.2 (s, H, H-j) and PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.5) 1.30 (s, 32H, H-g), 1.68 (m, 9H, H-e, e', h), 2.32 (m, 6H, H-d, d', i), 4.05 (q)-4.18 (m) (6H, H-a, b, c, f), 5.2 (s, H, H-j). Protons a to j are illustrated in Figure 1.

Particle preparation

The multiple emulsion-solvent evaporation (w/o/w) technique was employed for the encapsulation of ω-CH and LS as reported previously 19. Briefly, a 0.1% (v/v) solution of protein (100 mg mL⁻¹) in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) pH 7.4 was added dropwise to a homogenizing solution of polymer (30 mg mL⁻¹) and aerosol AOT (2 mM) in dichloromethane (15 mL) and emulsified using a IKA yellowline DI 25 basic at 8000 rpm for 30–40 s. This first emulsion was then gradually added to a mixing 1% (w/v) PVA solution (135 mL). This w/o/w emulsion was left to mix with a Silverson L4 RT mixer at 1000 rpm for 3 h to allow for dichloromethane evaporation at 25°C. The particles obtained were collected by centrifugation (EBA 20, Hettich) at 6000 g for 6 min at room temperature. The supernatant was labeled “wash 1” and retained for further analysis. The microparticles were re-suspended in 120 mL PBS buffer to remove the residual PVA present on the surface of the particles and centrifuged as before. The collected supernatants were labeled “wash 2”. The microparticles were then filtered, vacuum-dried overnight and stored in the fridge. Three batches of each type of particle were prepared.

Materials and methods

Materials

Novozyme 435 (a lipase from Cândida antarctica immobilized on a microporous acrylic resin) was purchased from Bio Catalytics (USA) and stored over P₂O₅ at 5°C prior to use. Glycerol, 1,3-propanediol, ω-pentadecalactone, ω-chymotrypsin (type II from bovine pancreas), lysozyme (from chicken egg white), aerosol OT (dioctyl sodium sulphosuccinate), poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA, M_w 9–10 KDa, 80% hydrolyzed), azocasein, 4-methylumbelliferyl β-D-N,N’-N’-triacetylcithiotiroside, citric acid, trichloroacetic acid (TCA) and sodium citrate were all obtained from Sigma-Aldrich Chemicals (UK). Dichloromethane and N-[2-hydroxyethyl]piperazine-N’-[2-ethanesulphonic acid] (HEPES) were purchased from BDH (UK). Tetrahydrofuran (THF) was purchased from Fisher Scientific. Phosphate buffered saline tablets at pH 7.4 were obtained from Oxoid (UK). Divinyl adipate (DVA) was obtained from Fluorochem (UK). A polystyrene standards kit was purchased from Supelco (USA).

Figure 1. Chemical structure of PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1).
Particle characterization

The particles were visualized by scanning electron microscopy (FEI – Inspet S Low VAC Scanning Electron Microscope). A suspension of particles in water was deposited on 13 mm aluminum stubs layered with a sticky conductive carbon tab and air dried. An atomic layer of gold was deposited onto the particle containing stubs using an Emitech K 550X Gold Sputter Coater, 25 mA for 3 min.

Particle size and size distribution were determined by a laser scattering device (Beckman Coulter LS 13 320, with aqueous liquid module) according to the method described by Pamujula et al. The Fraunhofer method was used to calculate the size distribution of particles in water. The results obtained from measurements of at least three batches of microparticles were described by the volumetric mean diameter of the microparticles (VMD) in micrometers. Equation (1) gives the formula for the span of the volume distribution, which measures the width of the size distribution relative to the median diameter (d[v,50]). A more heterogeneous size distribution gives a large span value.

\[
\text{Span} = \frac{d[v,90] - d[v,10]}{d[v,50]} \quad (1)
\]

Powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) patterns were collected by using a Rigaku Miniflex X-ray diffractometer. Samples were finely ground and packed into an aluminum sample holder. Patterns were collected between 2\(^\theta\) and 50\(^\circ\) 2\(\theta\), at 0.02\(^\circ\) 2\(\theta\), scanning speed 2\(^\circ\)min\(^{-1}\), voltage 30 KV, current 15 mA using CuK\(\alpha\) (1.54 A\(\text{\AA}\)) radiation.

Drug loading and encapsulation efficiency

The theoretical encapsulation efficiencies and enzyme loading from different batches of microparticles were calculated from the measurement of the non-encapsulated protein fraction present in the wash samples (Equation 2) with the assumption that no protein was lost during the preparation and processing of the particles. The enzyme loading (\(\mu\text{g/mg}\)) was determined using (Equation 3).

\[
\text{Encapsulation Efficiency} (\%) = \frac{- \text{Protection not washed out (mg)}}{\text{Amount of protein initially added (mg)}} \times 100 \quad (2)
\]

\[
\text{Enzyme Loading} = \frac{- \text{Total amount of encapsulated enzyme (\(\mu\text{g}\))}}{\text{Total amount of polymer (mg)}} \quad (3)
\]

In vitro release of enzyme from microparticles

Sacrificial sampling was used to observe the release of the enzyme from the particles. In a clean dry 1.5 ml microtube, 10 mg of vacuum-dried particles and 1 ml of phosphate buffer saline (pH 7.4) at 37 \(^\circ\)C were placed under sink conditions. The microtubes were then incubated at 37 \(^\circ\)C in an orbital shaker (IKA KS 130) at 250 rpm. Samples were removed at increasing time points over 24 hours and centrifuged (5 min at 13 500 rpm (17 000 g), accuSpin Micro 17) to collect the particles. The supernatants were retained for analysis by the protein assays described below.

The bioactivity of both enzymes was presented as the bioactive fraction of the released enzyme. This was calculated from the ratio of enzyme concentration determined from enzyme activity and the total enzyme concentration as determined by UV spectroscopy using the methods described below.

Methods for assessing protein content and activity

The encapsulation washes (wash 1 and 2) and supernatants from the release studies were analyzed for protein content and activity using the following methods.

UV spectrophotometry

To determine the total protein content in a sample, the absorbance was measured at 282 nm for both \(\alpha\)-CH and LS, (UV/VIS spectrophotometer Lambda 40, Perkin Elmer, run via the UV WinLab version 2.80.03 software).

Azocasein assay

The proteolytic activity of \(\alpha\)-CH following release from particles was determined using a chromogenic-based technique as modified by Gaskell et al. Briefly, 50 \(\mu\text{L}\) sample, standard or blank and 200 \(\mu\text{L}\) of azocasein (10 mg/ml), prepared in 25 mM HEPES buffer were incubated for 3 h at 37 \(^\circ\)C. The reaction was terminated by addition of 750 \(\mu\text{L}\) of 0.3 M trichloroacetic acid to precipitate the undigested protein–chromogenic conjugate and the samples were centrifuged for 5 min at 13 500 rpm (17 000 g) (accuSpin Micro 17) to remove the precipitate. Blank samples were prepared using deionized water to determine the amount of azo-dye released nonenzymatically from the substrate. Absorbance of the samples was recorded at 415 nm compared to blank reagent samples using UV/VIS spectrophotometer Lambda 40, Perkin Elmer, using the UV WinLab version 2.80.03 software. Three replicates of each sample were obtained and processed.

Muramidase assay

The muramidase activity of LS was determined using the method described by Telkov et al. Supernatant (760 \(\mu\text{L}\)) was incubated with 8 \(\mu\text{M}\) 4-Methylumbelliferyl-\(\beta\)-D-N,N\(^0\)-triacetylchitotrioside in 50 mM citrate buffer, pH 6.0, in the presence of 5 mM MgSO\(_4\) for 3 h at 37 \(^\circ\)C. The fluorescence intensity was measured using a fluorescence spectrophotometer (Varian Cary Eclipse, operated via the Cary Eclipse Advanced Reads Application version 1.1 (132) software) at an excitation wavelength of 350 nm and an emission wavelength of 450 nm.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using student t-paired test. The F-test was used to test the significance of variance. The statistical significance level was set at \(p \leq 0.05\).

Results and discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate if changes to the M\(_W\) and chemistry of PGA-co-PDL would alter the encapsulation, release and bioactivity of \(\alpha\)-CH and LS loaded into microparticles fabricated by a w/o/w double emulsion solvent evaporation technique.

Polymer synthesis and characterization

The lipase catalyzed ring opening polymerization of an equimolar quantity of DVA, glycerol and o-pentadecenalactone produced PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1) of different M\(_W\)s (11.2, 26.0 and 39.2 KDa) by altering the time in contact with the lipase (6, 18 and 24 h, respectively) (Figure 1). A maximum M\(_W\) for this type of polymer was obtained around 24 h synthesis followed by a subsequent decrease in M\(_W\) as hydrolytic reactions dominate. This means that the range and difference in M\(_W\)s achievable is small and can be difficult to control. The incorporation of 1,3-propanediol in place of the glycerol produced PPA-co-PDL (1:1:1,
M̄W 22.0 KDa) which is more hydrophobic than PGA-co-PDL as it does not have pendant hydroxyl groups.

A different set of polymers with a constant 1:1 ratio of DVA and glycerol, but with either 0.5 or 1.5 equivalents of o-pentadecalactone, was also prepared (1:1:0.5, M̄W 23.0 KDa and 1:1:1.45, M̄W 34.0 KDa). These polymers should be more (1:1:1.45) and less (1:1:0.5) hydrophobic than PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1) depending on the relative number of hydroxyl groups. It is difficult to control the M̄W of these polymers as an increase in the amount of o-pentadecalactone increases the polymer M̄W obtained. This means it can be difficult to directly compare the effect of monomer ratio on polymer and particle properties as there is also a difference in M̄W. 1H-NMR integration patterns were used to confirm that the monomeric content in the polymers were as expected and comparable to that reported in previous work. The difference in the number of protons at δ1.34 is indicative of the different proportions of pentadecalactone within the polymer backbone (1:1:0.5 (11H), 1:1:1 (22H) and 1:1:1.45 (32H)).

Particle characterization

Protein-containing and blank particles containing no protein were prepared from each of the different polymers. The mean median protein amount of o/ω double emulsion solvent evaporation technique. The results are the mean of three different prepared batches with LS-loaded microparticles fabricated from the same polymers (Figure 2G–I). Hence, changing either the polymer M̄W or the type of protein encapsulated did not alter the particle morphology.

Altering the chemistry did, however, have an effect on particle morphology. PGA-co-PDL (1:1:0.5) produced small, aggregated, non-uniform particles (Figure 2D), and increasing the lactone content within the polymer changed the particle morphology slightly. With both α-CH- and LS-loaded PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45) particles, some of the particles appeared irregular in shape with rough surfaces, while the others were spherical with a slightly smoother surface than those prepared from PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1) (Figure 2E and J). These smooth particles were more similar to those obtained from PPA-co-PDL (Figure 2F and K). A similar morphology to α-CH-loaded microparticles was observed with the LS-loaded microparticles (Figure 2H-K). Thompson et al. reported similar morphological characteristics for particles prepared from PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL. Drug-free and ibuprofen-loaded microparticles were produced using PGA-co-PDL were rough with a ridged morphology, whereas the equivalent PPA-co-PDL microparticles were smooth.

Drug loading and encapsulation efficiency

Polymer M̄W, degree of hydrophilicity, polymer chemistry, volume of organic phase and enzyme and polymer concentration play an important role in determining the amount of enzyme encapsulated. It was reported that increasing the M̄W of poly (ε-caprolactone), PLA and PLGA increased the encapsulation efficiency and the mean particle size due to the increased viscosity of the organic phase, which reduces protein diffusion into the external aqueous phase before polymer hardening.

Partitioning of the drug from the internal to the external aqueous phase limits the encapsulation efficiency and drug loading in particles prepared via the emulsion solvent evaporation technique. During particle formation, solvent removal and polymer precipitation can alter the amount of the protein that partitions into the external aqueous phase. It was previously determined that 3 h was the optimum time for PGA-co-PDL protein-containing particle formation as this provided enough time for the solvent to evaporate yet minimized enzyme diffusion to the aqueous phase.

The encapsulation efficiencies and enzyme loading from three different batches of microparticles prepared using different polymers are presented in Table 2.

Increasing the M̄W of PGA-co-PDL had no significant effect on either the encapsulation efficiency or α-CH loading (p >0.05). However, a shift in PGA-co-PDL M̄W from 11.4 to 39.2 KDa might not be large enough to induce a significant increase in the viscosity of the organic phase, leading to a change in enzyme loading. The degree of crystallinity of the polymer is another important factor affecting drug encapsulation as drugs will tend to be encapsulated in the amorphous region of the polymer.

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<td>LS</td>
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<td>PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M̄W 11.4 KDa)</td>
<td>13.6 ± 1.4</td>
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<td>PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M̄W 26.0 KDa)</td>
<td>14.4 ± 2.9</td>
<td>12.2 ± 0.9</td>
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<td>PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M̄W 39.2 KDa)</td>
<td>13.8 ± 2.9</td>
<td>17.5 ± 0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45, M̄W 34.0 KDa)</td>
<td>9.6 ± 0.81</td>
<td>15.1 ± 1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M̄W 22.0 KDa)</td>
<td>10.0 ± 1.2</td>
<td>14.4 ± 1.5</td>
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Table 2. Encapsulation efficiencies (%) and enzyme loading (μg/mg particle) of α-Chymotrypsin (α-CH) and Lysozyme (LS) within polymeric particles formulated over 3 h via the multiple emulsion solvent evaporation technique. The amount of α-CH or LS added into the aqueous phase was 150 mg. The results are the mean of three different prepared batches ± S.D.

**Significant difference PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45, M_w 34.0 KDa) versus PGA-co-PDL (1:1:0.5, M_w 23.0 KDa), *significant difference PPA-co-PDL (22.0 KDa) versus PGA-co-PDL (26.0 KDa) at p < 0.05.**
The PXRD patterns illustrated in Figure 3 indicate that both PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL are semicrystalline copolymers. Both PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL showed characteristic peaks at 21.5° and 24° 2θ. PGA-co-PDL of different Mw, have the same XRD patterns, indicating they have the same level of crystallinity, and this may explain the similar encapsulation efficiencies observed. However, the PXRD pattern for PPA-co-PDL has a flatter baseline between 0° and 20° 2θ, indicating that it is a more crystalline material. This difference in degree of crystallinity between PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL may have influenced microparticle formation but does not explain the increased encapsulation efficiency observed with PPA-co-PDL.

Furthermore, changing the polymer composition by altering the pentadecalactone monomeric ratio from 0.5 to 1.5 molar ratio significantly (p < 0.05) increased the encapsulation efficiency of LS-loaded microparticles. An increase was also observed with Z-CH-loaded particles, but this was not significant (p > 0.05).

Compared to PGA-co-PDL, utilizing the more hydrophobic polymer (PPA-co-PDL) a significant (p < 0.05) increase in encapsulation efficiency and Z-CH loading (from 12.52 ± 4.42 to 38.58 ± 6.48% and 41.70 ± 0.01 to 128.50 ± 12.70%, respectively) was observed. The highest Z-CH and LS encapsulation efficiency and loading were obtained from the most hydrophobic polymer, PPA-co-PDL. These results suggest that the more hydrophobic polymers demonstrate better encapsulation efficiency and drug loading of both enzymes compared to the less hydrophobic variants.

Similarly, McGee et al. showed that ovalbumin-loaded microparticles prepared with PLGA with higher lactide to glycolide content (85:15) gave higher protein loading compared to the more hydrophilic one with 50:50 lactide to glycolide ratio. Also, higher amounts of bovine albumin were encapsulated using PLGA (75:25) compared to the more hydrophilic PEGylated PLGA co-polymer.

Comparing the encapsulation efficiencies and enzyme loading for both enzymes, it was found that LS showed a higher encapsulation and loading compared to Z-CH with all the PGA-co-PDL variants assessed (Table 2). LS is a smaller, positively charged enzyme that has the ability to be adsorbed onto the surface of polymers and this adsorption will affect its encapsulation and release kinetics. Furthermore, as previously reported, the temperature rises during the emulsification steps and the adjustment of the pH to 7.4 can lead to favorable conditions for LS adsorbing onto polymers. This could result in increased amounts of LS being encapsulated within PGA-co-PDL.

Also, we cannot neglect that using 1% PVA as an emulsifier imparts a negative charge to the surface of PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL which would support enzyme binding. It was reported that PVA, which is physically entrapped within the surface layer of the polymer, imparts a negative surface charge on the microparticles produced. However, comparable amounts of 128.5 ± 12.7 and 121.33 ± 11.6 μg/mg particle of Z-CH and LS were encapsulated, using PPA-co-PDL. This represents a significant increase over PGA-co-PDL for Z-CH, but not LS-loaded particles.

In vitro release

It was anticipated that polymer Mw and polymer backbone chemistry would be important factors affecting the drug release. Varying the Mw, varies the degradation rate of the polymer and release kinetics of the drug can be controlled accordingly. Additionally, the hydrophobicity of the polymer can affect the drug release by reducing the rate of water penetration into the microspheres and drug egress to some extent compared to the less hydrophobic polymers. Furthermore, different particle morphologies may affect the protein release profile through its effect on the microspheres porosity and the distribution of the drug within the matrix.

The release profiles of either Z-CH or LS under sink conditions from different batches are shown in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 shows the release of Z-CH from microparticles prepared using different polymers over 24 h into PBS buffered saline. Most of the Z-CH-loaded microparticle formulations showed a biphasic release pattern with an initial high burst release phase followed by a continuous release phase for the first 5 h which became constant till the end of the release study. The extent of the burst release varied between different microparticle formulations, depending on the polymer used, and a notable difference was observed between PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1 26.0 KDa or 11 KDa) and the other polymers.

Other research groups have observed that increasing polymer Mw led to a decrease in the total amount of enzyme released. In this study, there was no general trend observed between increasing Mw and decreasing enzyme release, which may be because the differences in Mw were small, but there was significantly less release after 24 h with PGA-co-PDL (39 KDa) particles compared to PGA-co-PDL (26 KDa or 11 KDa) particles. Varying the proportion of PDL within the polymer from 0.5 to 1.5 mole equivalents did not have any consistent effect on the
\(\alpha\)-CH release from microparticles. The biggest difference in release was found when comparing PGA-co-PDL (26 KDa) with the more hydrophobic polymer of a comparable Mw, PPA-co-PDL (22 KDa). Compared to PPA-co-PDL, PGA-co-PDL showed a significantly (\(p<0.05\)) higher burst release of \(\alpha\)-CH (20.13 \pm 3.0\% compared to 8.54 \pm 2.7\%) and a greater amount of release after 24 h in PBS buffer (45.28 \pm 2.7\% compared to 15.84 \pm 4.5\%). Furthermore, PPA-co-PDL demonstrated the lowest burst and total release of \(\alpha\)-CH of all the prepared microparticles.

The initial burst release phase of \(\alpha\)-CH from these microparticles could be due to the rapid release of protein near to the surface of microparticles which accumulates at the water/oil interface during the solvent evaporation process. The release of the protein entrapped within the polymeric matrix causes a continuous release of \(\alpha\)-CH during the first 5 h. Furthermore, the constant release phase could be attributed to the protein aggregation and degradation that occurs during the release process. Despite the higher encapsulation efficiency gained from PPA-co-PDL, these particles demonstrated a slower burst and continuous release rate compared with PGA-co-PDL with comparable Mw. This might be due to the higher hydrophobicity and slower rate of degradation of this polymer (unpublished data). The lower surface area available for contact with the dissolution medium and the large particle size could be other contributing factors toward this slow release as denser microparticles with smooth surfaces will usually produce a lower rate of initial release compared with rough, porous microparticles. This is in agreement with Thompson et al. who observed a similar effect for ibuprofen release from PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL microparticles.

The release profiles of LS from the different polymeric microparticles are shown in Figure 5. In this case, the LS-loaded microparticle formulations showed a very small initial burst phase followed by continuous release until the end of the release study at 24 h. With LS there was a general trend of increasing PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1) Mw and decreasing enzyme release. The release of LS from the 39 KDa polymer was significantly lower, and there was less difference observed between the 26 KDa and 11 KDa variants. Although, as with \(\alpha\)-CH, there was a difference in the release of LS from PGA-co-PDL (22 KDa) and PPA-co-PDL (26 KDa) of a comparable Mw, with LS the release profile of the PPA-co-PDL particles was virtually the same as that of PGA-co-PDL (39 KDa).

Figure 4. Release profiles of \(\alpha\)-Chymotrypsin from polymeric microparticles prepared via the multiple emulsion solvent evaporation technique. The results are the mean of three different prepared batches at each time point \(\pm\) S.D.

Figure 5. Release profiles of lysozyme from polymeric microparticles prepared via the multiple emulsion solvent evaporation technique. The results are the mean of three different prepared batches at each time point \(\pm\) S.D.
It was observed that the pattern of LS release was different from that obtained with α-CH. α-CH release was characterized by an initial burst followed by a slow continuous release phase for the first 5 h then a plateau was reached. On the other hand, LS showed a lower burst release followed by a higher continuous release phase. This was especially evident with the lower M_w PGA-co-PDL. The lower burst release could be attributed to the more efficient encapsulation of LS inside the microparticles with minimum amounts remaining adsorbed on the surface. Stronger binding of LS to these polymers could be another reason for this as LS is cationic and these particles have a slightly anionic surface from incomplete removal of PVA.

With all the microparticles studied, an incomplete release of enzyme from these was observed even after 3 weeks. This has been observed by many researchers, and it might be due to degradation of the protein during the manufacturing of the microparticles. Formation of intermolecular linkages, hydrolysis of the protein molecule and the nonspecific adsorption between polymer and protein either physically or chemically can lead to protein degradation.

**Enzyme bioactivity**

Retaining biological activity is crucial for the delivery of enzymes and peptides, and preservation of the tertiary structure is required to maintain activity. Enzyme activity before and after encapsulation and upon release can be monitored to investigate the effect of these processes on biological activity. Many researchers have estimated the bioactivity of LS by measuring the rate of degradation of *Micrococcus luteus* cells. However, this method is not always reproducible because of the dependence on the ionic strength of the medium. Different methods using small synthetic substrates have been developed, investigated and recommended for accurate determination of LS.

Observation of the bioactive fraction of α-CH released from microparticles prepared using PGA-co-PDL and PPA-co-PDL (Figure 6) indicates that the maximum bioactivity was observed at zero hours and ranged between 27% and 60%. This was followed by a sharp decrease in activity during release into PBS buffer (pH 7.4). It was noticed that α-CH released from PGA-co-PDL exhibited a maximum activity of between 40% and 60%, and PPA-co-PDL showed the lowest activity of <27% at zero hour. Furthermore, a gradual loss in bioactivity was recorded for all the α-CH-loaded microparticles investigated. The reduction in activity of α-CH could be attributed to conformational changes in the α-CH active site during emulsification. The homogenization and use of organic solvents are considered important steps in causing protein deactivation and aggregation resulting in a low bioactive fraction at zero hour. The gradual loss in activity during *in vitro* release was most likely due to autolysis and protein fragmentation. This finding is similar to what was already reported by Gaskell et al. where they found that α-CH released from PGA-co-PDL-loaded microparticles lost its bioactivity gradually with an onset of loss due to proteolysis upon 2 h release.

At zero hour of release, LS retained almost 100% of its initial bioactivity within all the particles investigated. Then, with time it began to gradually lose its bioactivity (Figure 7). The higher M_w polymer, PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, 39.0 KDa), and the more hydrophobic polymers, PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45) and PPA-co-PDL, showed a significantly (p < 0.05) higher bioactive fraction, after 5 and 24 h release, compared to the other co-polymers. The maximum LS bioactive fraction was found using PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45, M_w 34 KDa) and PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M_w 39.2 KDa) 0.78 ± 0.08 and 0.42 ± 0.02, respectively, after incubation in PBS for 24 h.

LS is a relatively stable enzyme, which can better withstand the harsh condition of the emulsification process and this was confirmed by the retention of its bioactivity at zero time of release (bioactive fraction ranged from 0.9 to 1.03 for all the investigated polymers, Figure 7). Similarly, it was reported by Giteau and coworkers that the LS released from PLGA microspheres was still biologically active compared to α-CH, peroxidase and β-galactosidase-loaded PLGA microspheres. However, during *in vitro* release there was a gradual decrease in the bioactive fraction which could be attributed to the effect of PBS buffer on the released LS. So, the nature of the release medium on the enzyme activity is very important, as many proteins are not stable in buffer media at 37 °C. However, for most studies the choice of release medium is dictated by the *in vivo* target for delivery of the enzyme. Jiang et al. investigated protein stability and protein–polymer interactions in different release media and their effect on protein release profiles from PLGA microspheres using LS as a model protein. They found that LS showed a higher stability at pH 4.0 acetate buffer and pH 2.5 glycine buffer, whereas at pH 7.4 PBS, the stability was low and significant protein adsorption was evident. Furthermore, the higher bioactive fraction of LS in PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1, M_w 39.2 KDa) and PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45) could...
possibly be attributed to the higher solubility of these polymers in DCM compared with PPA-co-PDL and the lower M₆₀ PGA-co-
PDL polymers. Additionally, the longer the contact time of the
enzyme in the organic phase, the more enzyme activity would be
lost. Thus, a higher solidification rate would be beneficial in
retaining the LS biological activity. Similar results were reported
by Ghaderi and Carlforss regarding stability of LS during
emulsification process within PLGA. Future work will focus
on enhancing macromolecule encapsulation efficiency as well as
maintaining stability during the manufacturing process. For
example, the use of additives to protect the protein structure or
the application of alternative formulation methods such as spray
drying or s/o/w emulsions may substantially reduce the loss in
bioactivity during encapsulation.

**Conclusion**

This research has shown that altering the M₆₀ of PGA-co-PDL
from 11.2 to 39.2 KDa had little impact on particle morphology,
size, encapsulation efficiency or bioactivity of α-CH- and LS-
loaded microspheres. Altering the polymer chemistry had a
greater effect, as a higher encapsulation efficiency and drug
loading of both α-CH and LS were obtained with PPA-co-PDL
compared to PGA-co-PDL particles. A biphasic release pattern
was obtained with all microspheres studied, and the release
profiles varied according to the polymer used. A lower burst and
continuous release was obtained for both enzymes with the more
hydrophobic polymers, PPA-co-PDL and PGA-co-PDL (1:1:1.45)
and with the higher M₆₀ PGA-co-PDL (39.2 KDa). Furthermore, a
very low burst release was recorded with LS compared to α-CH
with all the investigated polymers.

One benefit of the low impact of small changes in M₆₀ or PDL
content on encapsulation and release is that batch-to-batch
variations in the polymers should not have a demonstrable
effect on either the properties of particles formed or the
encapsulation and release data obtained. These findings suggest
that more substantial changes to polymer properties are required
to significantly influence the encapsulation and release of
proteins. The nature of this type of polymerization reaction
means that it is difficult to achieve higher M₆₀ materials and
extend the range of M₆₀s studied. Small changes to the polymer
chemistry has been shown to have a greater effect, hence future
studies will focus on further modifying the polymer chemistry
either by incorporating different monomers into the backbone or
via modification of the pendant hydroxyl groups.

**Declaration of interest**

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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