



## Synthesis and antiviral effect of novel fluoxetine analogues as enterovirus 2C inhibitors

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### ABSTRACT

Enteroviruses (EV) are a group of positive-strand RNA (+RNA) viruses that include many important human pathogens (e.g. poliovirus, coxsackievirus, echovirus, numbered enteroviruses and rhinoviruses). Fluoxetine was identified in drug repurposing screens as potent inhibitor of enterovirus B and enterovirus D replication. In this paper we are reporting the synthesis and the antiviral effect of a series of fluoxetine analogues. The results obtained offer a preliminary insight into the structure-activity relationship of its chemical scaffold and confirm the importance of the chiral configuration. We identified a racemic fluoxetine analogue, **2b**, which showed a similar antiviral activity compared to (*S*)-fluoxetine. Investigating the stereochemistry of **2b** revealed that the *S*-enantiomer exerts potent antiviral activity and increased the antiviral spectrum compared to the racemic mixture of **2b**. In line with the observed antiviral effect, the *S*-enantiomer displayed a dose-dependent shift in the melting temperature in thermal shift assays, indicative for direct binding to the recombinant 2C protein.

Enteroviruses (EV) form the largest genus in the *Picornaviridae* family of positive-strand RNA (+RNA) viruses and include many important human pathogens (e.g. poliovirus, coxsackievirus, echovirus, numbered enteroviruses and rhinoviruses). Infections with EV cause a wide variety of clinical manifestations ranging from mild diseases, like hand-foot-and-mouth disease, conjunctivitis to severe conditions like aseptic meningitis, severe neonatal sepsis like diseases and acute flaccid paralysis and myelitis. Rhinoviruses (RV) cause the common cold and can trigger exacerbation of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Tapparel et al., 2013). These diseases are mostly self-limiting but can give rise to life-threatening respiratory and/or neurological complications especially in infants, young children and immunocompromised individuals. The increasing outbreaks of EV-D68 and several other emerging enteroviruses (e.g. EV-A71 and CV-A16) with severe neurological complications worldwide exemplify the public health threat emerging from EVs (Pons-Salort et al., 2015; Cassidy et al., 2018; Morens et al., 2019). Despite their huge socioeconomical and medical burden, vaccines only exist against poliovirus and EV-A71, for which vaccines were recently approved in China (Aw-Yong et al.,

2019). No antiviral therapy to combat EV infections is currently approved and treatment is limited to supportive care.

Fluoxetine (Prozac®), a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) licensed for the treatment of major depression and anxiety disorders, was identified in drug repurposing screens as potent inhibitor of enterovirus B and enterovirus D replication (Ulferts et al., 2013; Zuo et al., 2012). Mode-of-action studies revealed that only the *S*-enantiomer of fluoxetine inhibits viral replication by directly binding to the non-structural protein 2C (Bauer et al., 2019b). The ATP<sup>ase</sup> dependent RNA helicase 2C is a highly conserved non-structural protein among EVs and involved in pleiotropic functions during the viral life cycle (uncoating, RNA replication, encapsidation, membrane rearrangement) (Mirzayan and Wimmer, 1992, 1994; Rodriguez and Carrasco, 1993; Papageorgiou et al., 2010; Xia et al., 2015; Bienz et al., 1992; Adams et al., 2009; De Palma et al., 2008; Sweeney et al., 2010). Fluoxetine was shown to inhibit EV-B replication in mice and additionally has already been successfully used to treat an immunocompromised child with life-threatening chronic enterovirus encephalitis (Benkahla et al., 2018; Gofshteyn et al., 2016). Together this indicates that fluoxetine offers a

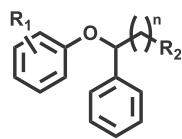
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**Table 1**

**Sensitivity of CVB3 to Fluoxetine Analogues.** Shown are EC<sub>50</sub> and CC<sub>50</sub> values in μM. Data represents mean values ± standard deviation calculated from three independent experiments and each experiment was performed in biological triplicates. NA = not active.



Compound	n	R <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	CC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	SI
(RS)-fluoxetine	2	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		3.03 ± 0.56	18.81 ± 1.36	6.21
(S)-fluoxetine	2	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		0.50 ± 0.14	21.63 ± 1.40	43.26
(R)-fluoxetine	2	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	18.82 ± 1.34	-
1a	2	2-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	> 30	-
1b	2	3-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	12.56 ± 1.79	-
1c	2	2-Cl, 4-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	3.14 ± 0.07	-
1d	2	2-OMe, 4-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	18.41 ± 1.26	-
2a	1	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		1.22 ± 0.15	> 30	> 24.60
2b	2	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		0.41 ± 0.27	> 30	> 73.17
3	2	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		NA	> 30	-
4a	1	4-CF <sub>3</sub>		4.2 ± 0.927	> 30	> 7.14

potential option as antiviral therapy for clinical use. Here, we report an initial investigation of a series of fluoxetine analogues, in which we introduce some basic changes in the original scaffold, to gain an early insight into the structure-activity relationships of fluoxetine.

We previously reported a profiling of several fluoxetine fragments and described that the fragment *N*-Methyl-3-(4-(trifluoromethyl)phenoxy)propan-1-amine showed modest antiviral activity against coxsackievirus B3 (CVB3) (Bauer et al., 2019b). This result indicated that the structural features of the trifluoro-phenoxy moiety and the amino moiety are essential for the antiviral activity whereas the 3-phenyl moiety seems dispensable. The *para*-trifluoro-phenoxy moiety is crucial for the SSRI activity because changes of the substituent lower the affinity towards the serotonin transporter (SERT) (Wenthur et al., 2014). Hence, fluoxetine analogues with modifications on the CF<sub>3</sub>-substituent positions on the phenoxy ring were synthesized. Rather than in *para* position, the CF<sub>3</sub> group was placed in *ortho* or in *meta* position on compounds 1a and 1b, respectively. In compounds 1c and 1d, an additional substituent in *ortho* position was introduced to the parent

compound (Wenthur, 2016).

The second moiety of interest was the methylamine group. The well-characterised pan-enterovirus inhibitor guanidine hydrochloride (GuaHCl) has been shown to target 2C (Pincus et al., 1986). We designed fluoxetine analogues substituting the methylamine group with GuaHCl. Compounds 5a and 5b differ in the length of the linker chain accounting for the additional atom in GuaHCl compared to the methylamine. Further, in compound 3 the *N*-methyl group was replaced by an acetyl group, to explore the need of a basic nitrogen in that position.

CVB3 causes an observable cytopathic effect (CPE) apparent as rounding, detachment and eventually dying of cells. The newly synthesized compounds were tested in a multicycle CPE-reduction assay to elucidate whether they were capable of inhibiting virus replication and thereby preventing the formation of CPE similar to fluoxetine. Therefore, subconfluent HeLaR19 cells were treated with a concentration range of compounds and the cells were immediately infected with CVB3 at MOI 0.001 resulting in full CPE in the infected control without compound treatment within 3 days. In parallel, cytotoxicity was

**Table 2**

**Comparison of compound cytotoxicity and antiviral activity (CVB3) in different cell lines.** Shown are EC<sub>50</sub> and CC<sub>50</sub> values in μM. Data represents mean values ± standard deviation calculated from two independent experiments. Each experiment was done in biological triplicates. SI = Selectivity Index (CC<sub>50</sub>/EC<sub>50</sub>). Selectivity index was calculated from the averaged EC<sub>50</sub> and CC<sub>50</sub> values of the independent experiments.

Compound	HeLaR19			HEK293T			HAP1		
	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	CC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	SI	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	CC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	SI	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	CC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	SI
(RS)- fluoxetine	2.70 ± 0.54	29.03 ± 1.04	11	1.41 ± 0.89	25.87 ± 1.45	18	2.40 ± 0.33	23.74 ± 1.01	10
(S)-fluoxetine	0.62 ± 0.01	27.67 ± 0.87	45	0.7 ± 0.65	24.65 ± 2.56	35	0.69 ± 0.04	24.00 ± 1.87	35
2a	2.43 ± 0.32	56.78 ± 0.03	23	2.30 ± 0.44	45.87 ± 0.45	20	2.20 ± 0.32	40.72 ± 0.61	19
2b	0.87 ± 0.98	64.99 ± 1.34	75	1.05 ± 0.02	52.98 ± 0.21	53	0.98 ± 0.21	49.39 ± 0.11	50

Table 3

**Broad-Spectrum antiviral activity of most potent compounds.** Shown are EC<sub>50</sub> values in  $\mu\text{M}$ . Data represents mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation calculated from three independent experiments. Each experiment was done in biological triplicates. NA = not active.

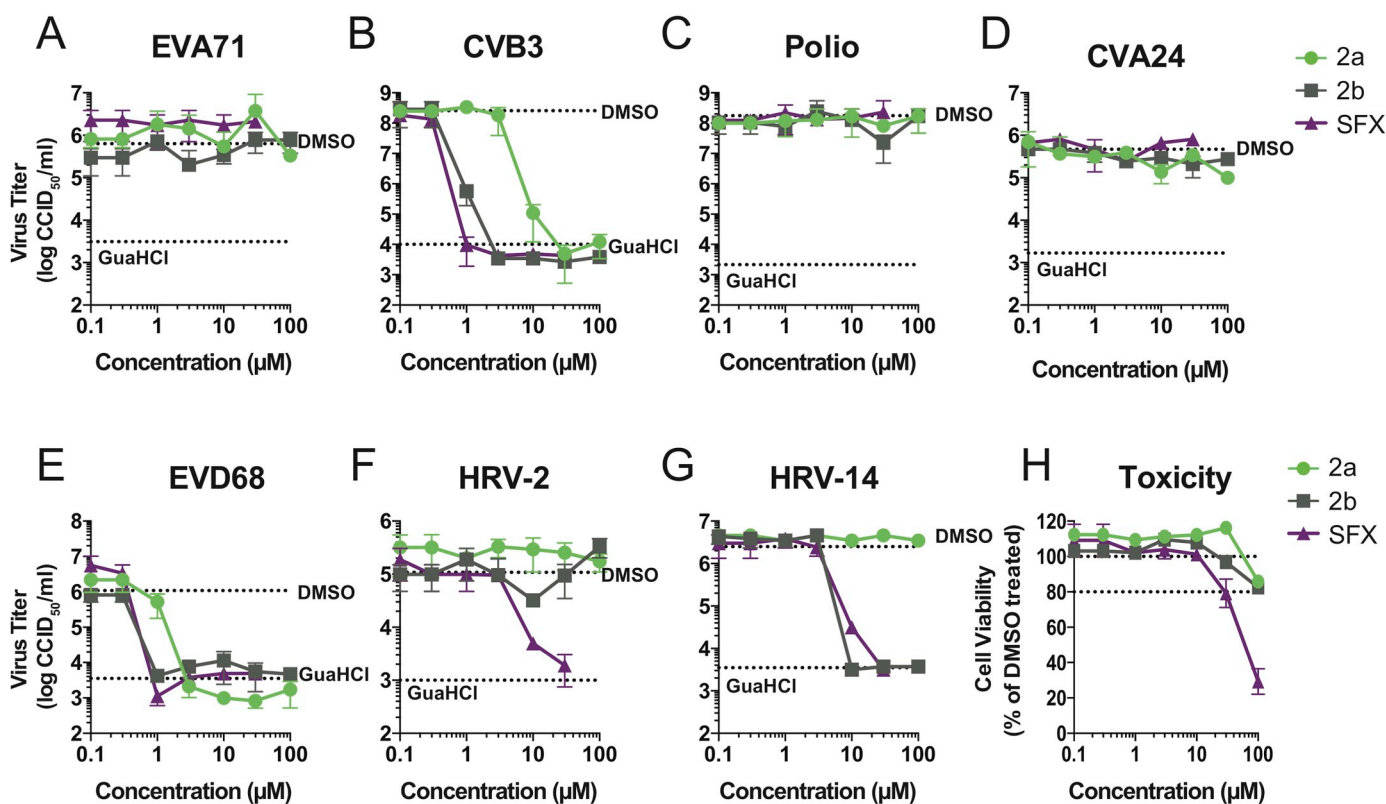
Virus	EV-A71	CVB3	PV-1	CV-A24	EV-D68	HRV-A2	HRV-B14
Species	EV-A	EV-B	EV-C	EV-C	EV-D	RV-A	RV-B
Strain	BrCr	Nancy	Sabin1	Joseph	Fermon		
( <i>RS</i> )-fluoxetine	NA	2.84 $\pm$ 0.73	NA	NA	2.49 $\pm$ 0.23	NA	NA
( <i>S</i> )-fluoxetine	NA	0.70 $\pm$ 0.14	NA	NA	0.63 $\pm$ 0.17	6.99 $\pm$ 0.84	7.25 $\pm$ 0.69
2a	NA	1.98 $\pm$ 0.68	NA	NA	3.03 $\pm$ 0.48	NA	NA
2b	NA	0.87 $\pm$ 0.33	NA	NA	0.56 $\pm$ 0.21	NA	3.33 $\pm$ 1.05

determined using a colorimetric method using the (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5-(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium) salt (MTS). It should be noted at this point that all compounds were synthesized as racemic mixture and therefore both the racemic mixture as well as the enantiomers of fluoxetine were used as positive controls. Changing the CF<sub>3</sub> substituent from *para* to *ortho* or *meta* position or introducing a second substituent on the ring abolished the antiviral activity of compounds 1a-1d (Table 1). On the contrary, compounds 2a, 2b and 4a, which contained changes on the amino moiety, retained antiviral activity. Changing the *N*-methyl group to the acetamide group resulted in the inactive compound 3 (Table 1).

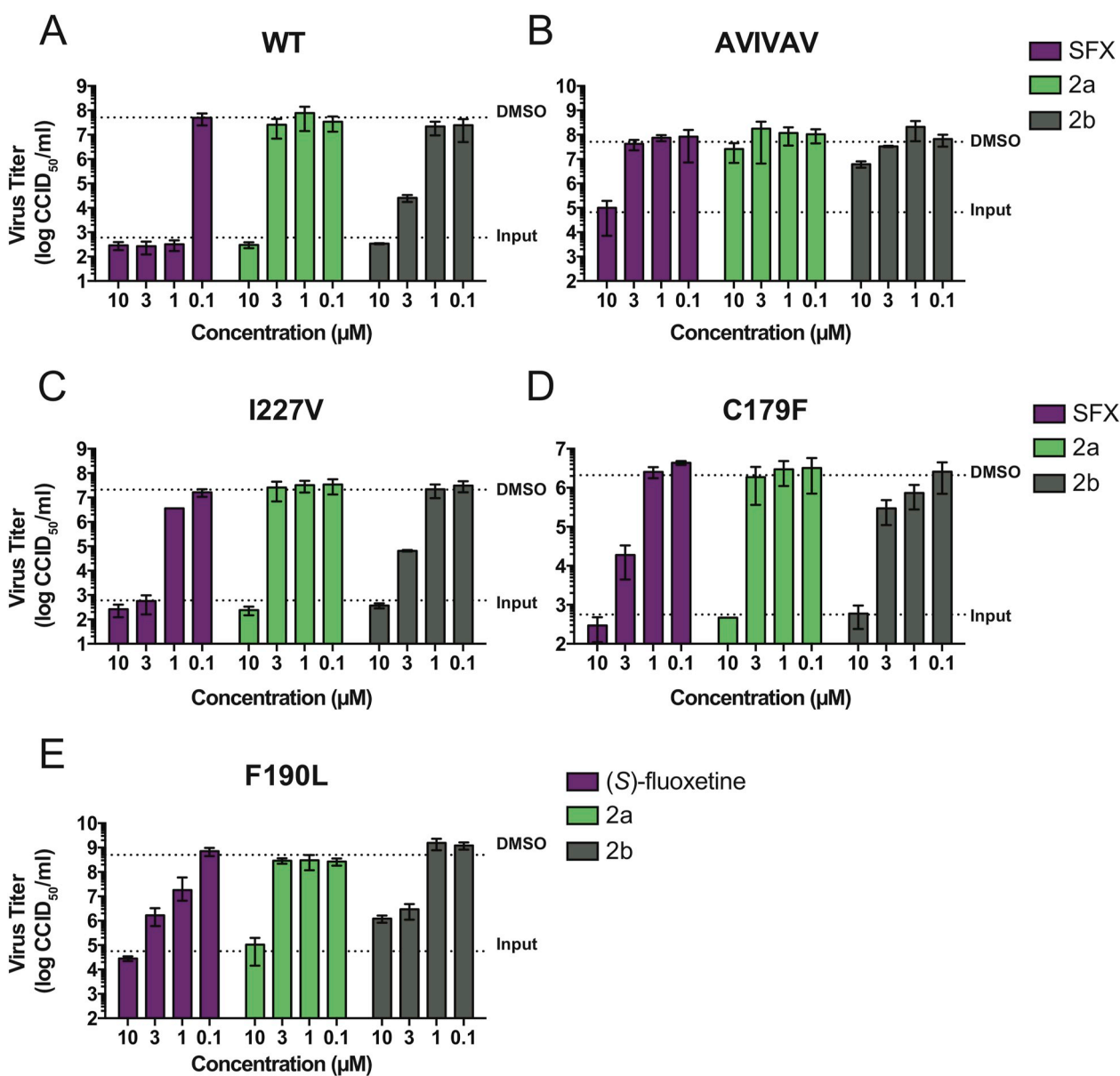
Like fluoxetine, compound 2b was synthesized and tested as a racemic mixture. It proves to be as potent in inhibiting CVB3 replication as (*S*)-fluoxetine and 10-fold more potent than racemic fluoxetine. To exclude a cell-type specific effect of the antiviral efficacy and to evaluate the cytotoxicity of compounds 2a and 2b, multicycle assays using

different cell lines was performed. Subconfluent HEK239T cells and HAP1 cells were treated with serial dilution of the compounds 2a and 2b and cytotoxicity as well as antiviral activity against CVB3 were evaluated in parallel. Compound 2a and compound 2b show the same range of antiviral activity against CVB3 in all cell lines. Importantly, both compounds are 2- to 3-fold less cytotoxic than racemic or (*S*)-fluoxetine in all three cell lines tested (Table 2). For unknown reasons, compounds 2a and 2b did not show antiviral activity in the monkey cell lines BGM and Vero (data not shown). Taken together, changes in the trifluoro phenoxy part of the molecule resulted in loss of antiviral activity. Modifications on the amine part were tolerated and increased the antiviral activity and the selectivity index (SI) of the compounds slightly.

To investigate the broad-spectrum anti-enteroviral activity of the compounds 2a and 2b, Hela R19 cells were infected with representative virus serotypes of different enteroviruses species in both a multicycle



**Fig. 1.** Antiviral effect of analogue 2a and 2b on a panel of enteroviruses. In a single cycle assay Hela R19 cells were infected with different enterovirus species (A) EV-A71 (strain BrCr) (B) CVB3 (strain Nancy) (C) poliovirus (strain Sabin) (D) CV-A24 (Strain Joseph) (E) EV-D68 (strain Fermon) (F) HRV-A2 (G) HRV-B14 at MOI 1 and treated with serial dilutions of (*S*)-fluoxetine (SFX) and the analogues 2a and 2b. As a control, guanidine hydrochloride (GuaHCl) was used as a pan-enterovirus inhibitor targeting 2C. At 8 or 10 h post infection (depending on the virus, see [Supplementary Information](#)), cells were freeze-thawed three times and virus titers of lysates were determined by endpoint titration. (H) In parallel, uninfected cells were treated with compound and cell viability was determined using an MTS assay. Data represent mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation from one representative of two independent experiments. Every experiment was performed in biological triplicates.



**Fig. 2. Mutations in the CVB3-2C protein confer resistance to compound 2a and 2b.** Hela R19 cells were infected with a selection of CVB3 viruses harbouring previously identified mutations in the non-structural protein 2C, which confer resistance towards (S)-fluoxetine (SFX) (Bauer et al., 2019b). Hela R19 were infected with and MOI 1 of (A) CVB3 wildtype virus. (B) The AVIVAV mutant (A224V-I227V-A229V triple mutant) (C) the I227V single mutant (D) the C179F and (E) the F190L mutant. Eight hours post infection cells were freeze-thawed three times and virus titers were determined with endpoint titration. Data represented show mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation from one experiment representative of two independent experiments. Every experiment was performed in biological triplicates.

CPE reduction assay (MOI 0.001 or 0.01, depending on virus, see [Supplementary Information](#)) and in a single cycle assay (MOI 1) in which virus reproduction was evaluated after 8 h or 10 h of infection (depending on virus, see [Supplementary Information](#)). Both, **2a** and **2b** inhibited CVB3 and EV-D68, but not EV-A71 or representatives of the EV-C species (poliovirus and CV-A24) (Table 3 and Fig. 1). Compound **2b** showed a slightly higher potency towards CVB3 and EV-D68 compared to compound **2a**. Unlike racemic fluoxetine, **2b** also inhibited HRV-14 replication. Notably, **2b** inhibited HRV-14 even more potently than (S)-fluoxetine. However, unlike (S)-fluoxetine, **2b** did not inhibit HRV-2 (Table 3 and Fig. 1).

Over the last decades several structurally disparate 2C inhibitors were identified but the mode of action is poorly understood (Bauer et al., 2017). We previously reported the putative binding area of (S)-fluoxetine in a homology model of CVB3 2C, which was based on the published crystal structure of EV-A71 2C, and provided experimental

support for that model through mutational analysis of potential interacting residues (Bauer et al., 2019b; Guan et al., 2017). We demonstrated that the triple mutation A224V-I227V-A229V (AVIVAV mutant), which gives cross resistance towards most of the 2C inhibitors (De Palma et al., 2008), as well as the single mutations I227V, C179F and F190L conferred resistance towards (S)-fluoxetine (Bauer et al., 2019b). To explore if the newly synthesized compounds have a similar resistance profile, and thus potentially occupy the same binding site, we infected Hela R19 cells with viruses carrying mutations which confer resistance to (S)-fluoxetine. Viruses harbouring the 2C triple mutation A224V-I227V-A229V or the single mutations I227V, C179F or F190L were tested for cross-resistance towards the novel analogues **2a** and **2b**. HelaR19 cells were infected with mutant viruses at an MOI of 1 and virus titers were determined by endpoint titration at 8 h post infection. The triple mutant A224V-I227V-A229V conferred a high level of resistance towards both compound **2a** and **2b** as it does to (S)-fluoxetine.

**Table 4**

**Antiviral activity of the 2b enantiomers.** Shown are EC<sub>50</sub> and CC<sub>50</sub> values in  $\mu\text{M}$ . Data represents mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation calculated from three independent experiments and each experiment was performed in biological triplicates.

Compound	EV-A71	CVB3	PV-1	CV-A24	EV-D68	HRV-2	HRV-14	CC <sub>50</sub>
(S)-fluoxetine	> 30	0.83 $\pm$ 0.29	> 30	> 30	0.68 $\pm$ 0.95	2.49 $\pm$ 2.5	3.76 $\pm$ 1.45	27.81 $\pm$ 0.95
<b>2b</b>	> 30	0.81 $\pm$ 0.46	> 30	> 30	0.56 $\pm$ 0.77	> 30	4.3 $\pm$ 2.98	60.76 $\pm$ 0.45
(R)-2b	> 30	> 30 <sup>a</sup>	> 30	> 30	4.13 $\pm$ 1.4	> 30	> 30	57.95 $\pm$ 0.65
(S)-2b	> 30	0.19 $\pm$ 0.45	> 30	> 30	0.11 $\pm$ 0.02	7.49 $\pm$ 1.12	0.98 $\pm$ 1.25	59.6 $\pm$ 1.45

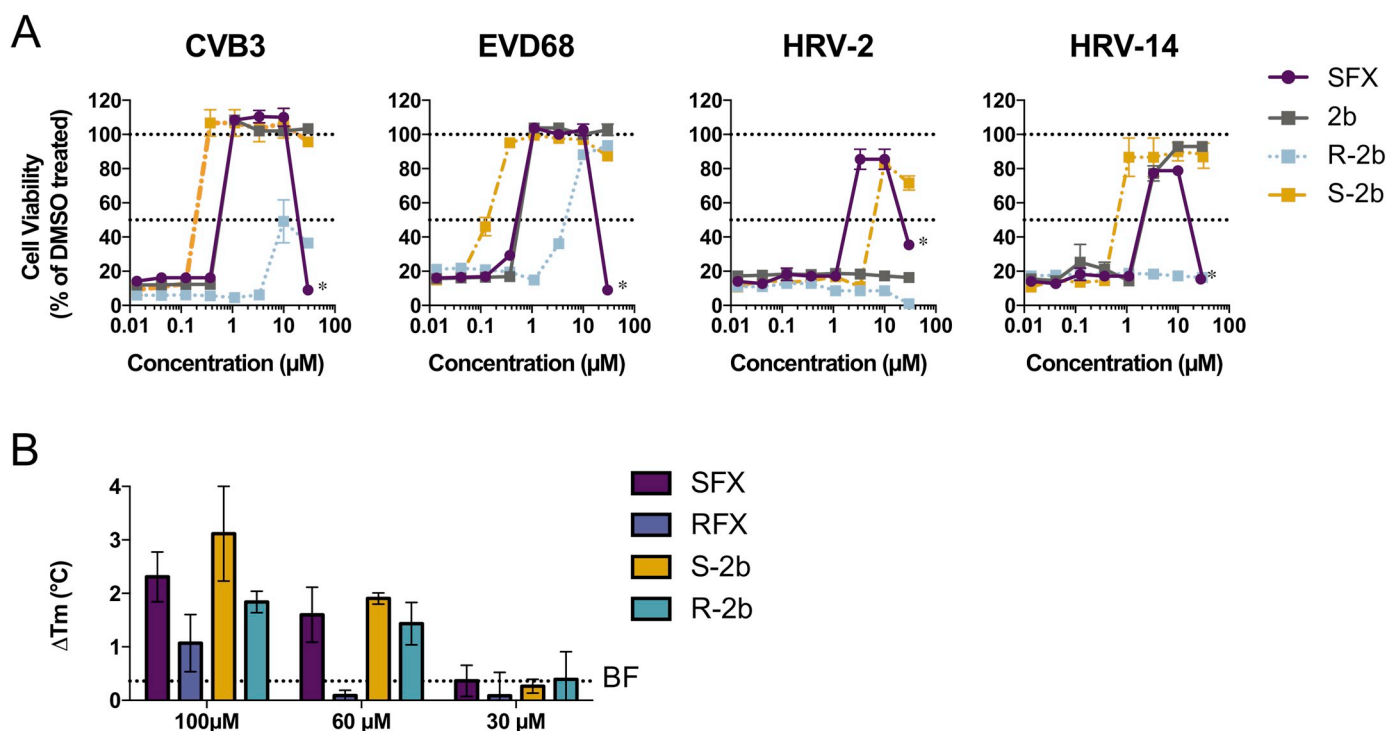
<sup>a</sup> Subtle antiviral activity observed.

Remarkably, the single mutation I227V showed resistance towards (S)-fluoxetine but not against the new analogues **2a** or **2b**. The mutation C179F conferred resistance towards (S)-fluoxetine and **2b**, but not against **2a**. Notably, the mutation F190L did not confer resistance to either **2a** or **2b**. Summarized, the overall resistance profile for the new compounds is very similar to (S)-fluoxetine but not identical (Fig. 2). This suggests that the compounds likely occupy the same binding pocket as (S)-fluoxetine, but the exact binding mode could be slightly different. Unfortunately, the lack of an experimental structure of the fluoxetine/2C complex does not yet allow us to generate an accurate binding model for the newly reported compounds.

Given the improved antiviral activity of the racemic mixture of **2b**, we dissected the role of the two **2b**-enantiomers. The antiviral activity of the enantiomers was evaluated in a multicycle assay (Table 4). The S-enantiomer of **2b** showed a ~3–4 fold increased antiviral activity against CVB3, EV-D68 and HRV-14 compared to the racemic **2b** and (S)-fluoxetine (Fig. 3A). Additionally, the S-enantiomer but not the racemic mixture of **2b** also inhibited HRV-2 (Fig. 3A). Remarkably, the R-enantiomer showed subtle antiviral activity against CVB3 and EV-D68 (Fig. 3A). Both enantiomers did not inhibit EV-A71 or the

representative members of the EV-C species (PV-1 and CV-A24, data not shown). Additionally, we investigated the binding of the two enantiomers to a recombinant fragment of CVB3 2C ( $\Delta$ 116) using a thermal shift assay. As previously reported, (S)-fluoxetine shifted the melting temperature of 2C in a dose-dependent manner. Consistent with the antiviral activity, the **2b** S-enantiomer caused a dose-dependent shift in the melting temperature of 2C, indicative of direct binding. Unlike (R)-fluoxetine, a thermal shift was also observed for the **2b** R-enantiomer of **2b** at higher concentrations. This suggests that the R-enantiomer of **2b** exerts indeed subtle antiviral activity.

In conclusion, our study established that the introduced changes on the *para*-trifluoro-phenoxy moiety of fluoxetine resulted in the loss of antiviral activity. Although it may not be possible to fully uncouple the SSRI activity from the antiviral activity, it appears that modifications on the amine moiety can increase the antiviral activity and reduce cytotoxicity. Additionally, we confirmed the importance of the chiral configuration in maintaining the antiviral activity. Similar to fluoxetine, the antiviral activity of the **2b** S-enantiomer was higher compared to the R-enantiomer or the racemic mixture of **2b**. Interestingly, unlike (R)-fluoxetine, the **2b** R-enantiomer gained subtle antiviral activity



**Fig. 3. The S-enantiomer of 2b exerts potent antiviral activity concomitant with 2C binding.** (A) A Multicycle CPE reduction assay to determine the antiviral activity of the 2b-enantiomers was performed. HeLa R19 cells were treated with serial dilutions of racemate, (S)-, or (R)- enantiomer of 2b and infected with CVB3 (strain Nancy), EVD68 (strain Fermon), HRV-2 (G) and HRV-14 at low MOI (depending on the virus, see Supplementary Information) to reach full CPE within three days. As positive control, cells were treated with (S)-fluoxetine. \* indicates cytotoxicity of (S)-fluoxetine. Data shown are from one experiment representative of three independent experiments done in biological triplicates. (B) The binding of the 2b-enantiomers to a recombinant fragment of CVB3-2C was determined by thermal shift assay. The thermal stabilization of 2C is represented by change in melting temperature. The dashed line represents data from the negative control BF738735, a phosphatidylinositol-4-kinase III beta inhibitor, used at a concentration of 250  $\mu\text{M}$ . Data shown is representative of two independent experiments, each of which was done in technical triplicates. Error bars depict standard deviation calculated from both experiments.

against CV-B3 and EV-D68. In line with the antiviral activity, the *S*-enantiomer as well as high concentrations of *R*-enantiomer caused a dose-dependent thermal shift of 2C melting temperature, suggestive of a direct interaction. Known resistance mutations confer cross-resistance to the analogues **2a** and **2b** and our data indicate that the novel compounds interact with 2C in a similar manner as (*S*)-fluoxetine. However, the observed variations in the resistance profile of the two drugs point to subtle differences in the interaction with the 2C protein.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.antiviral.2020.104781>.

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