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Complete List of Authors:	Pasquinucci, Lorella; Universita degli Studi di Catania, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences Parenti, Carmela; University of Catania, Department of drug sciences Ruiz-Cantero, M Carmen; University of Granada, Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine and Institute of Neuroscience, Biomedical Research Center Georgoussi, Zafiroula; National Center for Scientific Research "Demokritos", Laboratory of Cellular Signalling and Molecular Pharmacology, Institute of Biology Pallaki, Paschalina; Natl Ctr Sci Res Demokritos Cobos, Enrique ; University of Granada, Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine and Institute of Neuroscience, Biomedical Research Center Amata, Emanuele; Universita degli Studi di Catania, Department of Drug Sciences Marrazzo, Agostino; Universita degli Studi di Catania, Department of Drug Sciences Prezzavento, Orazio; Universita degli Studi di Catania, Department of Drug Sciences Arena, Emanuela; Universita degli Studi di Catania Dichiara, Maria; University of Catania, Department of drug sciences Salerno, Loredana; University of Catania, Department of drug sciences Turnaturi, Rita; University of Catania, Department of Drug Sciences



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# Novel *N*-substituted benzomorphan-based compounds: from MOR-agonist/DOR-antagonist to biased/unbiased MOR agonists.

Lorella Pasquinucci<sup>a</sup>, Carmela Parenti<sup>b\*</sup>, M. Carmen Ruiz-Cantero<sup>c</sup>, Zafiroula Georgoussi<sup>d</sup>, Paschalina Pallaki<sup>d</sup>, Enrique J. Cobos<sup>c</sup>, Emanuele Amata<sup>a</sup>, Agostino Marrazzo<sup>a</sup>, Orazio Prezzavento<sup>a</sup>, Emanuela Arena<sup>a</sup>, Maria Dichiara<sup>a</sup>, Loredana Salerno<sup>a</sup>, Rita Turnaturi<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Drug Sciences, Medicinal Chemistry Section, University of Catania, Viale A. Doria 6, 95125 Catania, Italy.

<sup>b</sup> Department of Drug Sciences, Pharmacology and Toxicology Section, University of Catania, Viale A. Doria 6, 95125 Catania, Italy.

<sup>c</sup> Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine and Institute of Neuroscience, Biomedical Research Center, University of Granada, Parque Tecnológico de Ciencias de la Salud, 18100 Armilla, Granada, Spain; Teófilo Hernando Institute for Drug Discovery, 28029, Madrid, Spain.

<sup>d</sup> Laboratory of Cellular Signaling and Molecular Pharmacology, Institute of Biosciences and Applications, National Center for Scientific Research "Demokritos", Ag. Paraskevi 15310, Athens, Greece.

\* Corresponding authors.

E-mail address: cparenti@unict.it (Carmela Parenti)

E-mail address: rita.turnaturi@unict.it (Rita Turnaturi)

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**ABSTRACT:** Modifications at the basic nitrogen of the benzomorphan scaffold allowed the development of compounds able to segregate physiological responses downstream of the receptor signaling, opening new possibilities in opioid drug development. Alkylation of the phenyl ring in the *N*-substituent of the MOR-agonist/DOR-antagonist LP1, resulted in retention of MOR affinity. Moreover, derivatives **7a**, **7c** and **7d** were biased MOR agonists towards ERK1,2 activity stimulation, whereas derivative **7e** was a low potency MOR agonist on adenylate cyclase inhibition. They were further screened in the mouse tail flick test and PGE2-induced hyperalgesia and drug-induced gastrointestinal transit.

During the last decade efforts were made to develop effective multitarget opioid ligands as an alternative strategy to overcome the typical side effects associated to opioid selective agonists.<sup>1-3</sup> For instance, valid analgesic effect with lower propensity to produce tolerance and physical dependence was reported for both dual MOR/DOR agonist<sup>4-6</sup> and MOR agonist/DOR antagonist ligands given in persistent pain models.<sup>7-9</sup>

Recently, the concept of biased agonists,<sup>10</sup> able to differentially activate GPCR downstream pathways, became a new approach in the design of novel drug candidates. It was reported that opioid compounds promoting G-protein signaling produce analgesia, while  $\beta$ -arrestin recruitment is responsible for opioid side effects such as constipation.<sup>11-13</sup>

Benzomorphan nucleus represents a versatile template<sup>14,15</sup> for the development of a specific functional profile by modifying *N*-substituent or 8-OH group. In this context, the introduction of a tertiary *N*-Methyl-*N*-phenylethylamino group as *N*-substituent conferred a MOR agonist profile *in vitro* and *in vivo* (1, Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> The replacement of the *N*-ethylamino spacer with the *N*-acetamido one was detrimental for MOR, DOR and KOR recognition,<sup>17</sup> while an *N*-propanamido spacer

improved the opioid binding profile. In particular, LP1 (2, Figure 1), with an N-phenylpropanamido substituent, resulted in vitro and in vivo a potent MOR agonist/DOR antagonist<sup>18</sup> able to counteract nociceptive pain and behavioral signs of persistent pain with low tolerance-inducing capability.<sup>19,20</sup> The phenyl replacement with the bulkier N-naphthyl ring (3. Figure 1), switched the MOR efficacy profile from agonism to antagonism.<sup>21</sup> Analogously, the increased steric hindrance of the aromatic moiety with indoline, tetrahydroquinoline or diphenylamine group affected the shift from MOR agonism to antagonism.<sup>22</sup> More recently, a dual MOR/DOR agonist, endowed of a significant long-lasting antinociceptive effect,<sup>23-</sup> <sup>25</sup> was developed through the introduction of the short and flexible 2R/S-methoxy ethyl spacer as N-substituent (LP2 4, Figure 1). Moreover, the 2S diastereoisomer of LP2 was found a potent G-protein biased MOR/DOR agonist with a 3-times lower ED<sub>50</sub> value.<sup>26</sup>

Since minor structural modifications often result in significant changes in the pharmacological profile of opioid ligands, we expanded our SAR studies by the synthesis of LP1 derivatives **7a-e**, variously alkylated at the phenyl ring of the *N*-propanamido substituent, and **11a-e**, featured also by a tertiary *N*-propanamido substituent. Finally, derivatives **14a-c**,

bearing a secondary or tertiary *N*-ethylamino spacer, were synthesized (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Benzomorphan-based compounds structures.

According to the previously reported method,<sup>17,28</sup> we prepared derivatives **7a-e**, **11a-e** and **14a-c** as reported in Schemes 1-3. After *cis*-( $\pm$ )-*N*-normetazocine resolution,<sup>27</sup> the target compounds **7a-e** were obtained by alkylation of *cis*-(-)-(1*R*,5*R*,9*R*)-*N*-normetazocine with the respective amides **6a-e** (Scheme 1).



Scheme 1. Synthesis of *N*-substituted normetazocine derivatives **7a-e**. Reagents and conditions: a) 3-bromopropionyl chloride (1.5 eq), 4-(dimethylamino)pyridine (DMAP) (0.47 eq), dry THF, rt, 3h; b) (–)-*cis*-(1R,5R,9R)-*N*-normetazocine (1 eq), NaHCO<sub>3</sub> (1.5 eq), KI, DMF, 65 °C, 20 h.



Scheme 2. Synthesis of *N*-substituted normetazocine derivatives **11a-e**. Reagents and conditions: a) benzaldehyde (1 eq), MeOH,

reflux, 3 h; b) NaBH<sub>4</sub> (0.5 M solution in EtOH) reflux, 6 h; c) 3bromopropionyl chloride (1.5 eq), 4-(dimethylamino)pyridine (DMAP) (0.47 eq), dry THF, rt, 3h; d) (-)-*cis*-(1*R*,5*R*,9*R*)-*N*normetazocine (1 eq), NaHCO<sub>3</sub> (1.5 eq), KI, DMF, 65 °C, 20 h.

*N*-benzyl anilines **9a-e**, obtained by reductive amination with NaBH<sub>4</sub>, were acylated with 3-bromopropionyl chloride to obtain the respective amides **10a-e**. Derivatives **11a-e** were prepared according to the synthetic route shown in Scheme 2.

The *N*-(2-chloroethyl)anilines **13a-c** were obtained by alkylation with 1-bromo-2-chloroethane.<sup>29</sup> Then, the next step to get target derivatives **14a-c** was carried out as reported in Scheme 3. All newly synthesized compounds were characterized by IR, <sup>1</sup>H NMR, <sup>13</sup>C NMR, and elemental analysis.



Scheme 3. Synthesis of *N*-substituted normetazocine derivatives 14a-c. Reagents and conditions: a) 1-bromo-2-chloroethane (0.3 eq), CH<sub>3</sub>CN, 110 °C in sealed tube, 10 min; b) (–)-*cis*-(1*R*,5*R*,9*R*)-*N*-normetazocine (1 eq), NaHCO<sub>3</sub> (1.5 eq), KI, DMF, 50 °C, 12 h.

To investigate the SAR of synthesized novel derivatives, their binding and efficacy profile at MOR, DOR and KOR was explored. Binding at MOR, DOR and KOR was evaluated by competitive displacement of [<sup>3</sup>H]DAMGO, [<sup>3</sup>H]DPDPE and [<sup>3</sup>H]U69,593, respectively.<sup>30</sup> K<sub>i</sub> values of derivatives **7a-e**, **11a-e** and **14a-c**, calculated using nonlinear regression analysis (GraphPad Prism), are listed in Table 1.

The synthesized derivatives showed a broad range of binding affinity for MOR ( $K_i$ = 7.4-1,540 nM) and low or no affinity for DOR and KOR. Derivatives 7a and 7e, having methyl groups in position 2',6' and 2',5' respectively, possessed the highest MOR affinity, followed by derivatives 7b, 7d and 7c having slight less affinity for this receptor. A third methyl group in position 4' (7b), as well as an ethyl group in position 6' (7d), reduced MOR affinity by 6- and 2times compared to 7a and 7e. The dimethyl alkylation in position 2' and 4' (7c) resulted in a worse MOR binding profile. Thus, methylation in *orto* and *meta* is well tolerated while the *para*-methylation was unfavorable. In MOR-ligand interaction the negative influence of para substitution, with both electron-withdrawing or electron-donor groups, was outlined.<sup>22</sup> A worse DOR and KOR binding profile was recorded for derivatives 7a-e. Indeed, in comparison to LP1 their DOR and KOR affinity were from 7- to 69-times and from 7- to 61-times lower, respectively. The introduction of a benzyl pendant at the amidic nitrogen (11a) and the

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simultaneous phenyl ring methylation (11b-e) resulted detrimental for opioid binding affinity, mainly at DOR and KOR (Table 1). Such modifications hindered the ligands to adopt a compatible ligand-receptor conformation. Derivatives 14a-c, featured by an *N*-ethylamino spacer, showed MOR affinity higher than derivatives 11a-e and lower than derivatives **7a-e**. The steric hindrance at the amine nitrogen in derivative **14a** resulted in a dramatically loss of opioid receptor affinity, mainly at MOR, respect to compound 1 ( $K_i^{MOR} = 6.1$  nM), featured by a tertiary *N*-Methyl-*N*-phenylethylamino group.

Table 1. Opioid receptor binding affinity of LP1 (2) derivatives 7a-e, 11a-e and 14a-c.



Com						ŀ	$K_i(nM) \pm SEM^{[a,b]}$		
Стр	R	R <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>	R <sub>3</sub>	R <sub>4</sub>	MOR	DOR	KOR	
7a	Н	CH <sub>3</sub>	Н	Н	CH <sub>3</sub>	$7.4 \pm 0.75$	$277 \pm 12$	$252 \pm 10$	
7b	Н	$CH_3$	$CH_3$	Н	$CH_3$	$43.7 \pm 2$	> 2,000	$313 \pm 15$	
7c	Н	CH <sub>3</sub>	$CH_3$	Н	Н	$20.8 \pm 1$	$474 \pm 20$	$340 \pm 13$	
7d	Н	CH <sub>3</sub>	Н	Н	$C_2H_5$	$14.9\pm0.92$	$198 \pm 8$	$320 \pm 11$	
7e	Н	$CH_3$	Н	$CH_3$	Н	$7.9 \pm 0.65$	$478 \pm 22$	$480 \pm 22$	
11a	Bn	Н	Н	Н	Н	$606 \pm 34$	> 5,000	> 5,000	
11b	Bn	CH <sub>3</sub>	Н	Н	$CH_3$	$400 \pm 24$	> 5,000	> 3,000	
11c	Bn	$CH_3$	$CH_3$	Н	$CH_3$	$504 \pm 27$	> 5,000	$444 \pm 24$	
11d	Bn	$CH_3$	$CH_3$	Н	Н	$165 \pm 7$	> 5,000	> 2,000	
11e	Bn	CH <sub>3</sub>	Н	Н	$C_2H_5$	$1,540 \pm 59$	> 5,000	$151 \pm 6$	
14a	Bn	Н	Н	Н	Н	$244 \pm 12$	> 1,000	> 3,000	
14b	Н	$CH_3$	$CH_3$	Н	Н	$129 \pm 10$	> 5,000	> 1,000	
14c	Н	CH <sub>3</sub>	Н	$CH_3$	Н	$182 \pm 13$	> 5,000	> 2,000	
1[c]						$6.1 \pm 0.50$	$147\pm5.700$	$31 \pm 1.30$	
2 (LP1) <sup>[d]</sup>						$0.83\pm0.05$	$29 \pm 1.00$	$110 \pm 6.00$	
DAMGO						$0.90 \pm 0.04$	-	-	
Naltrindole						-	$0.83\pm0.04$	-	
U50,488						-	-	0.27±0.03	

[<sup>3</sup>H]DAMGO displacement for MOR, [<sup>3</sup>H]DPDPE displacement for DOR, and [<sup>3</sup>H]U69,593 displacement for KOR. <sup>[c]</sup> Ref. [16]. <sup>[d]</sup> Ref. [17].

40 To examine the functional significance of derivatives 7a-e, 41 displaying the best MOR binding profile, we tested their 42 ability to affect agonist-mediated AC inhibition. Opioid 43 receptors signal through Gi/Go proteins to inhibit AC,31-34 which is known to be one of their major pathway to induce 44 analgesia.<sup>12</sup> For that reason, HEK293 cells stably expressing 45 the MOR were treated with increasing concentrations of 46 derivatives 7a-e, and the levels of forskolin-stimulated AC 47 activity were tested. Derivatives 7a-7d were unable to inhibit 48 AC even at high concentrations up to 10<sup>-5</sup> M (data not shown). 49 Treatment of HEK293 cells with compound 7e resulted with 50 50±3 % inhibition of cAMP accumulation at a concentration 51 of 10 µM (Figure 2). However, this effect was much lower 52 than that detected with LP1 (Figure 2). These results suggest that derivative 7e could be considered as an effective MOR 53 agonist with low potency on AC inhibition. To further identify 54 whether derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e behave as MOR agonists 55 we measured alterations of ERK1,2 phosphorylation mediated 56 by these derivatives upon MOR activation. It was previously 57

demonstrated that opioid receptors stimulate ERK1,2 via pertussis toxin-sensitive Gi/o-protein signaling mechanism<sup>32-34</sup> and regulate additional effectors by interacting with other scaffolding proteins.35 In addition, it is well known that signaling of opioid receptors through ß-arrestin pathway leads to ERK1,2 activation.<sup>36</sup> Serum-starved HEK293 cells expressing stably the MOR were challenged with derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e with different time intervals ranging from 5-15 min. As shown in Figure 3, western blotting with a specific phospho-ERK1,2 antibody revealed an increase in ERK1,2 phosphorylation reaching a peak within 5 min administration for tested derivatives, which decreased after 15 min compound exposure. The same pattern of increased ERK1/2 phosphorylation was also shown for LP1. However, the levels of ERK1,2 phosphorylation mediated by derivative 7e retain even after 15 min of receptor stimulation. These results suggest that 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e act as potent MOR agonists with derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d exerting biased agonist properties towards ERK1,2 activity stimulation.

To determine if *in vitro* biased and unbiased G-protein profile could reflect what is happening in animal pain models, derivatives **7a** and **7e** were further screened in the mouse-tail flick test. **7a** and **7e**, in a dose range from 2.5 up to 7.5 mg/kg i.p., did not significantly modify TFLs, during the entire time of observation (90 min, Figure 4 panel A and B, respectively) compared to the group of mice treated with saline (p > 0.05 vs saline-treated mice).

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Considering that PGE2-induced hyperalgesia is well known to be triggered by cAMP accumulation and the consequent protein kinase A activation,<sup>37</sup> we selected this assay as a suitable index of the behavioral effects of the derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e through cAMP inhibition. The administration of PGE2 induced a marked decrease in the withdrawal latency of the injected paw to heat stimulation, in comparison to saline-injected controls, denoting the development of thermal hyperalgesia. There were no statistically significant differences between the values obtained in the paw contralateral to PGE2 or saline (data not shown). Both morphine (1-3 mg/kg, s.c.) and LP1 (1-4 mg/kg, s.c.) induced a dose-dependent increase in paw withdrawal latency in PGE2-treated mice, reaching values similar to control animals (i.e. a full antihyperalgesic effect) (Figure 5) at the highest doses tested. In contradiction, the administration of 7a, 7c, 7d or 7e (8-16 mg/kg, s.c.) did not induce any significant antihyperalgesic effect (Figure 5). These results are in agreement with the inhibition of cAMP accumulation by morphine and LP1 and the absence of any effect detected by 7a, 7c, 7d or 7e in the same experiments.

As constipation is a known opioid-induced side effect dependent on the activation of  $\beta$ -arrestin pathway,<sup>12,13</sup> we also tested the effects of derivatives **7a**, **7c**, **7d** and **7e** on gastrointestinal transit. Immediately after the evaluation of the behavioral responses to heat stimulus, mice received intragastrically an activated charcoal solution. The charcoal meal travelled about 30 cm of the small intestine in either mouse treated i.pl. with saline or PGE2, indicating that the

administration of PGE2 do not influence gastrointestinal transit (Figure 6).

Morphine already induced significant gastrointestinal transit inhibition at a dose devoid of antihyperalgesic effect (1 mg/kg), and this effect dose-dependently increased reaching values of distance travelled by the charcoal meal as low as 10.5 cm at the highest tested dose of the opioid (3 mg/kg) (compare Figures 5 and 6). Instead, LP1 inhibited gastrointestinal transit only at the highest dose tested (4 mg/kg), which induced a maximal antihyperalgesic effect (compare Figures 5 and 6). These results indicate that the MOR agonist/DOR antagonist LP1 has a more favorable safety profile than morphine.



**Figure 2.** Effect of derivative 7e and LP1 on MOR-mediated cAMP accumulation. The inhibition of cAMP accumulation was measured as described in Material and methods in HEK293 cells stably expressing the MOR in the presence of various concentrations of LP1 and 7e, in response to treatment with 50  $\mu$ M forskolin. The IC<sub>50</sub> values of LP1 and 7e are 4.8 x10-9  $\pm$  0.5 M and 2.4 x10-4  $\pm$  0.83 M respectively. Data represent as cAMP accumulation (% of maximum) and are the average of  $\pm$  SEM of triplicate determinations from three independent experiments.



**Figure 3.** Effect of derivatives **7a**, **7c**, **7d** and **7e** on ERK1,2 phosphorylation mediated upon MOR activation. Stably transformed HEK293 cells expressing the MOR were challenged with 1  $\mu$ M of derivatives **7a**, **7c**, **7d** and **7e** for 5, 10 and 15 min and cell lysates were resolved in SDS-PAGE (10%). The ERK1,2 phosphorylation mediated by DAMGO and LP1 (1  $\mu$ M) after 5 min exposure was used as positive controls. Phosphorylation of ERK1,2 was abolished upon pretreatment of the cells with naloxone (10  $\mu$ M, 30 min), prior to 5 min DAMGO administration (negative control). The phosphorylated-ERK1,2 was visualized by immunoblotting with a phosphor-ERK1,2 (upper panel). Equal loading was verified by stripping and reprobing the PVDF membrane with a specific  $\alpha$ -tubulin antibody (lower panel). Results are representative of three independent experiments.



**Figure 4.** Time-course (min) of derivatives **7a** and **7e**-induced antinociceptive effect measured by tail flick test (panel A and B, respectively). Results are expressed in seconds (s). Data are means  $\pm$  SEM from 6 to 8 mice. \*P < 0.05 vs saline-treated mice.



Figure 5. Effects of morphine, LP1 and derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e on PGE2-induced heat hyperalgesia. The results represent the latency to hindpaw withdrawal in response to radiant heat in mice treated intraplantarly (i.pl.) with PGE2 or saline (S). Mice were tested (in the paw injected with PGE2 or its solvent) 10 min after the intraplantar injection. Morphine, LP1, 7a, 7c, 7d, 7e or their solvent (S) were administered subcutaneously (s.c.) 20 min before the i.pl. injection. Statistically significant differences between the values obtained in mice i.pl. injected with saline and PGE2: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, and between the values obtained in mice treated with PGE2 alone or associated with morphine or LP1: ##p<0.01 (one-way ANOVA followed by Bonferroni test).

However, the administration of **7a**, **7c**, **7d** or **7e** (8-16 mg/kg, s.c.) did not alter gastrointestinal transit distances, as the charcoal meal travelled approximately 30 cm of the small intestine in all cases (Figure 6). Although these derivatives were able to act in vitro as opioid agonists mediating ERK1,2 phosphorylation, someone could assume that they may activate the  $\beta$ -arrestin pathway and thus are unable to decrease gastrointestinal transit. Animals administered with these derivatives did not show either a Straub tail response (data not shown), which is a known centrally-induced opioid effect.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 6. Effects of morphine, LP1 and derivatives 7a, 7c, 7d and 7e on gastrointestinal transit. Immediately after the evaluation of PGE2-induced hyperalgesia [i.e. 30 minutes after the subcutaneous (s.c.) administration of morphine, LP1, 7a, 7c, 7d or 7e or saline (S)], mice were given a 0.5% charcoal suspension intragastrically. Transit of the charcoal was measured 30 min after its ingestion. Each bar and vertical line represents the mean  $\pm$  SEM of values obtained in 6-7 mice. Statistically significant differences between the values obtained in saline-treated group and mice treated with morphine or LP1: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01 (one-way ANOVA followed by Bonferroni test).

In summary, we have repurposed the *N*-modified benzomorphan scaffold to develop novel LP1 derivatives to further understanding the requirements for MOR interaction. A secondary amido *N*-substituent, as well as an *orto-* and/or *orto/meta-*methyl introduction to the phenyl ring, resulted in retention of MOR agonism. Derivatives **7a**, **7e**, **7c** and **7d** resulted MOR agonists with a peculiar functional profile, being **7e** a biased MOR agonist, able to stimulate G-protein pathway, and **7a**, **7c** and **7d** unbiased MOR agonists, able to stimulate ERK1,2 activity.

ERKs activation can be facilitated by distinct pathways mediated by G-proteins or  $\beta$ -arrestins dependent pathways. Fast activation of ERKs (2 min) is usually mediated by Gproteins resulted in the nuclear translocation of phosphorylated ERKs, whereas a slower activation of ERKs (10 min), the time sets that was used in our studies, is mediated by  $\beta$ -arrestins and resulted in the cytosolic retention of the phosphorylated ERKs. Different MOR agonists activate ERKs via  $\beta$ -arrestins dependent or independent pathways, thus resulting in differential subcellular localization of activated ERKs and altering their effect on gene transcription driven by the agonist [36]. In addition to opioid receptor-mediated activation of ERKs via  $\beta$ -arrestins,  $\beta$ 2AR stimulation resulted in ERKs activation via a  $\beta$ -arrestin dependent pathway.<sup>39</sup>

Compounds provided with functional selectivity could open new possibilities in opioid drug development. Indeed, biased MOR agonists toward G-protein are analgesics with low side effects incidence while biased MOR agonist toward  $\beta$ -arrestin could be useful to treat hypermotility disorders.

Besides the notable antinociceptive and antihyperalgesic effect, the dual-target profile of LP1 conferred a safer profile resulting in a less gastrointestinal transit inhibition than morphine. In accordance with in vitro data, synthesized derivatives did not elicit any significant antinociceptive and antihyperalgesic effect. Differences of pharmacokinetic could explain the low correlation between the in vitro evidence. In conclusion, we found hits able to segregate physiological responses downstream of the receptor signaling that could be optimized.

# ASSOCIATED CONTENT

#### Supporting Information

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Experimental procedures for the synthesis and characterization of the compounds, radioligand binding, adenylyl cyclase inhibition, ERK1,2 activations, tail-flick, PGE2-induced hyperalgesia, druginduced gastrointestinal transit inhibition assays. This material is available free of charge via the Internet.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Authors \* Dr Rita Turnaturi <u>rita.turnaturi@unict.it</u> ORCID 0000-0002-5895-7820 Prof. Carmela Parenti <u>cparenti@unict.it</u> ORCID 0000-0003-1412-2597

#### Author contributions

L.P., R.T. and C.P. designed all paper experiments, analyzed and discussed results and wrote the paper. L.P., R.T. and E.A. designed and synthesized new compounds. C.P. performed in vivo experiment. O.P. and E.Ar. performed and analyzed radioligand binding experiments. A.M., L.S. and M.D. participated to the statistical analysis and characterized compounds. Z.G. and P.P. performed and analyzed in vitro functional experiments. All authors have participated in the writing refinement and given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

## Note

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

MOR, mu opioid receptor; DOR, delta opioid receptor; GPCR, Gprotein coupled receptor; KOR, kappa opioid receptor; K<sub>i</sub>, inhibition constant; AC, adenylyl cyclase; HEK293, human embryonic kidney 293; ERK1,2, extracellular regulated kinase 1 and 2; TFLs, tail flick latencies; PGE2, Prostaglandin E2;  $\beta$ arrestins,  $\beta$ 2AR,  $\beta$ -adrenergic receptor; s.c., subcutaneous; i.p., intraperitoneal; i.pl. intraplantar.

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