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RETRACTED: Synthetic Makaluvamine Analogs Decrease c-Kit Expression and Are Cytotoxic to Neuroendocrine Tumor Cells

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Abstract: In an effort to discover viable systemic chemotherapeutic agents for neuroendocrine tumors (NETs), we screened a small library of 18 drug-like compounds obtained from the Velu lab against pulmonary (H727) and thyroid (MZ-CRC-1 and TT) neuroendocrine tumor-derived cell lines. Two potent lead compounds (DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14) identified from this screening were found to be analogs of the natural product makaluvamine. We further characterized the antitumor activities of these two compounds using pulmonary (H727), thyroid (MZ-CRC-1) and pancreatic (BON) neuroendocrine tumor cell lines. Flow cytometry showed a dose-dependent increase in apoptosis in all cell lines. Induction of apoptosis with these compounds was also supported by the decrease in myeloid cell leukemia-1 (MCL-1) and X-chromosome linked inhibitor of apoptosis (XIAP) detected by Western blot. Compound treatment decreased NET markers chromogranin A (CgA) and achaete-scute homolog 1 (ASCL1) in a dose-dependent manner. Moreover, the gene expression analysis showed that the compound treatment reduced c-Kit proto-oncogene expression in the NET cell lines. Induction of apoptosis could also have been caused by the inhibition of c-Kit expression, in addition to the known mechanisms such as damage of DNA by topoisomerase II inhibition for this class of compounds. In summary, makaluvamine analogs DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 induced apoptosis, decreased neuroendocrine tumor markers, and showed promising antitumor activity in pulmonary, thyroid, and pancreatic NET cell lines, and hold potential to be developed as an effective treatment to combat neuroendocrine tumors.

Keywords: makaluvamine; alkaloid; neuroendocrine; NET; cancer; tumor; therapeutic

1. Introduction

Neuroendocrine tumors (NETs) have the fastest growing incidence rate in the United States, while representing 0.5% of all malignancies [1,2]. They arise from chromaffin cells that are found throughout the body; hence NETs have a wide organ distribution [3]. Many NETs have an indolent course and tend to be asymptomatic. NETs arising in the gastrointestinal tract frequently become symptomatic when metastasized to the liver, where they cause carcinoid syndrome due to the secretion

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of bioactive hormones such as serotonin or kallikrein [4]. The symptoms associated with carcinoid syndrome include flushing, diarrhea, abdominal pain and palpitations [4,5]. Carcinoid syndrome can also develop in patients with pulmonary NETs, which account for about 5–8% of cases [6]. Somatostatin analogs are effective in controlling symptoms, but frequently they lead to tachyphylaxis with long-term use [7]. The potency of somatostatin analogs changes with the level of differentiation of NETs, with the best antitumor effect observed in the highly differentiated tumors expressing somatostatin receptors at higher incidence rates and density. The level of NET differentiation affects the disease prognosis as well. A wide variability in progression-free and overall survival has been reported to be dependent on the tumor grade [8,9]. The metastatic rate of NETs at the time of diagnosis can be as high as 13% [10]. Several medical treatment options are available for metastatic NETs, but none of them can effectively eliminate the tumor, and the response rate on single agent treatment is only 20% [11,12].

Natural products remain a promising source of cancer therapies as approximately 48% of all reported cancer drugs since 1940 are either natural products or their derivatives [13]. Makaluvamines are a group of alkaloids that are isolated from marine sponges, *Zyzzya* cf. *marsailis*, *Histodermella sp*, *Zyzzya fuliginosa* and *Smenospongia aurea* (Figure 1) [14–17]. These compounds have been reported to have tumor DNA damaging capabilities via topoisomerase II inhibition, leading to cell apoptosis [18–21]. Makaluvamine analogs have also been reported to produce their antitumor effects by inhibiting E3 ubiquitin-protein ligase (MDM2) and nuclear factor of activated T-cells (NFAT1) [21–24]. Several studies have shown that makaluvamines are cytotoxic to colon, breast, ovarian, pancreatic and non-small cell lung cancers [21–27]. However, they have not been assessed in neuroendocrine cancers. In an effort to discover viable systemic chemotherapeutic agents for NETs, we screened a small library of 18 drug-like compounds obtained from the Velu lab against pulmonary (H727) and thyroid (MZ-CRC-1 and TT) neuroendocrine tumor-derived cell lines. Two lead compounds (DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14, Figure 1) identified from this screening were found to be analogs of the natural product, makaluvamine. We further characterized the antitumor activities of DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 using pulmonary (H727), thyroid (MZ-CRC-1) and pancreatic (BON) neuroendocrine tumor cell lines. Herein, we describe the changes in cell viability, the expression of NET markers, and possible mechanisms of cytotoxicity of DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 in H727, MZ-CRC-1 and BON cell lines.

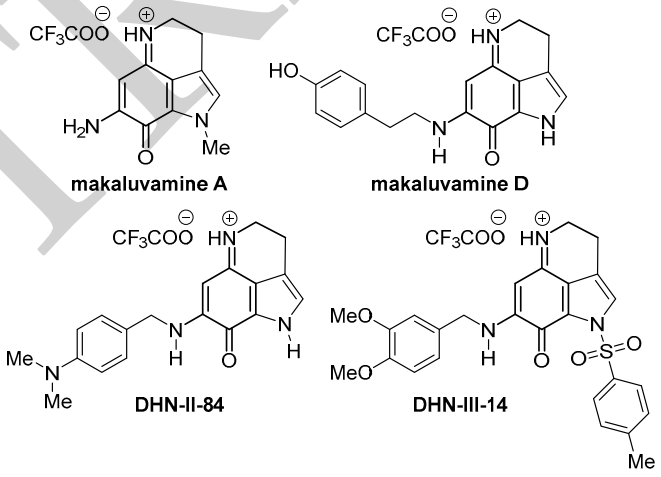

Figure 1. Chemical structures of makaluvamine A, makaluvamine D and the test compounds DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14.

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2. Results

2.1. Screening of Test Compounds on NET Cell Proliferation

We selected 18 compounds (Figure 2) for the initial screening against NET cell proliferation. These compounds included marine natural products, their analogs, or other drug-like molecules selected from the compound libraries available in Dr. Velu's lab.

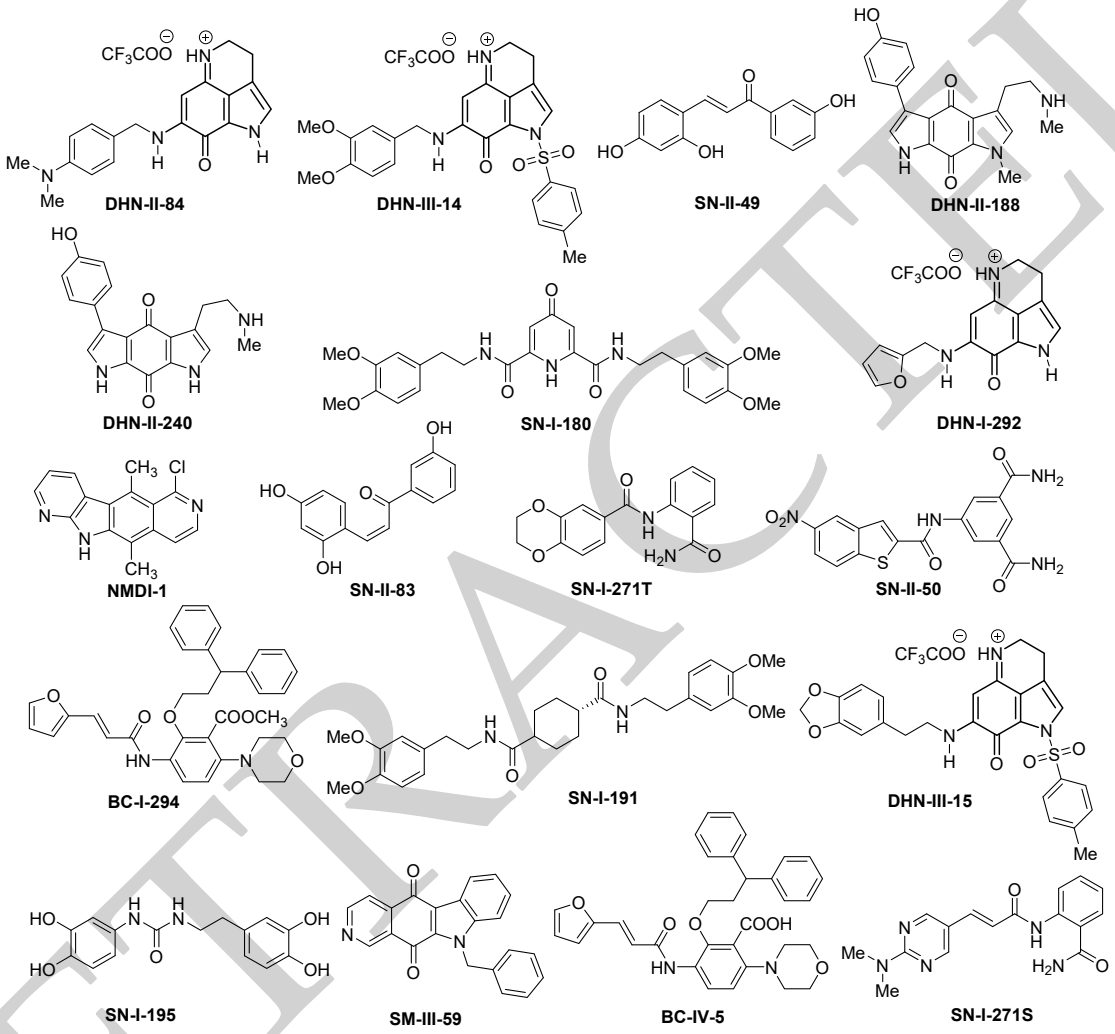

Figure 2. Chemical structures of 18 compounds used in the preliminary screening against pulmonary (H727) and thyroid (MZ-CRC-1 and TT) neuroendocrine tumor cell lines.

MTT assays were used to determine the cytotoxic activity of these test compounds on neuroendocrine cancer cell proliferation. Pulmonary carcinoid cell lines (H727) and medullary thyroid cancer cell lines (MZ-CRC-1 and TT) were treated with increasing doses of the compounds up to 100 μM concentration. The results of the screening are shown in Figure 3 and Table 1. Eight compounds (BC-IV-5, BC-I-294, NMDI-1, SN-I-271T, SN-I-180, SN-I-191, SN-I-195, SN-I-271S) failed to decrease the cell viability by >20% after 48 h of treatment. Six compounds (DNH-II-240, DHN-II-188, SN-II-50, SN-II-83, SN-II-49, DHN-I-292) decreased cell viability by >20%, but failed to inhibit 50% of the cell growth in all three cell lines. Only four compounds (DHN-II-84, DHN-III-14, DHN-III-15 and SM-III-59) decreased the cell viability by more than 50% at 50 μM concentrations in all three cell lines. Based on their potency of inhibiting cell growth, the two makaluvamine analogs DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 were selected as lead compounds to be explored further. The IC_{50} values of these

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compounds determined by MTT cell cytotoxicity assay were confirmed by CellTiter-Glo cell cytotoxicity assay (Figure 4). The MTT cell proliferation assay performed over six days showed that NET cell growth was inhibited in a dose-dependent manner, and the IC_{50} values ranged from 0.1 μM to 4 μM (Figure 5). The IC_{50} values for non-cancerous fibroblasts (WI-38 and 917) ranged from 1.5 μM–5.8 μM. (Figure S1), indicating several fold selectivity towards NET cells.

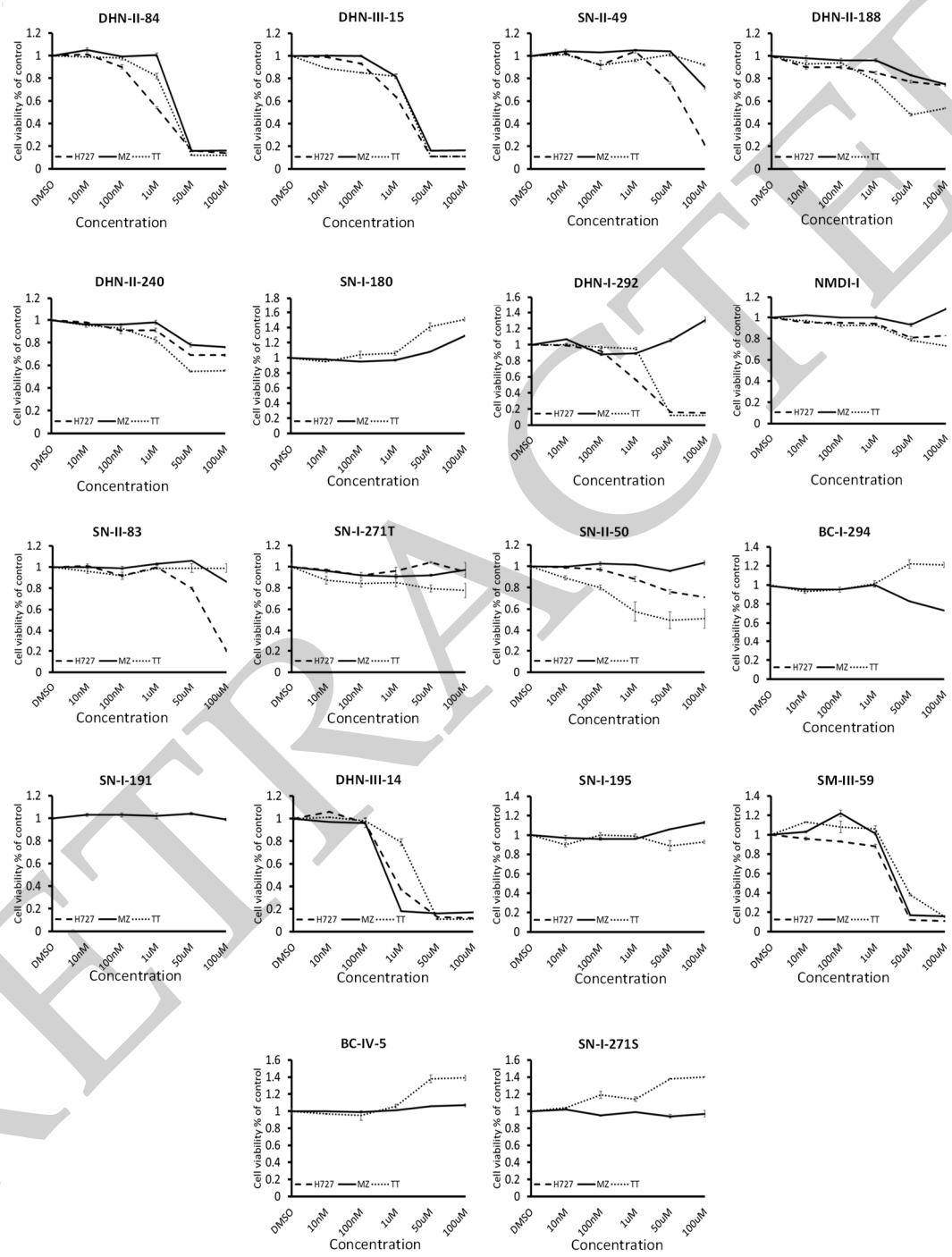

Figure 3. Test compounds showed varying degrees of cytotoxic effects on neuroendocrine cell lines: H727, MZ-CRC-1 and TT in MTT assay. Experiments were performed in quadruplicates and data are plotted as mean ± SEM. Prominent effects were displayed by DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14.

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Table 1. Maximum efficacy and IC_{50} values for the 18 compounds initially screened for anti-proliferative effects in three NET cell lines (H727, TT, MZ-CRC-1).

Compound	Maximum Efficacy	IC_{50}
DHN-II-84	88%	1–4 μM
DHN-III-14	85%	0.1–0.5 μM
SN-II-49 *	80%	>50 μM
DHN-II-188 **	57%	>100 μM
DHN-II-240	44%	>100 μM
SN-I-180	No anti-proliferative effect	>100 μM
DHN-I-292 †	85%	1–5 μM
NMDI-I	20%	>100 μM
SN-II-83 *	80%	>50 μM
SN-I-271	20%	>100 μM
SN-II-50 **	50%	>100 μM
BC-I-294	30%	>100 μM
SN-I-191	No anti-proliferative effect	>100 μM
DHN-III-15	90%	>10 μM
SN-I-195	No anti-proliferative effect	>100 μM
SM-III-59	90%	>10 μM
BC-IV-5	No anti-proliferative effect	>100 μM
SN-I-271S	No anti-proliferative effect	>100 μM

* Maximum efficacy only seen in H727 cells; ** Maximum efficacy only seen in TT cells; † Maximum efficacy only seen in H727 and TT cell lines.

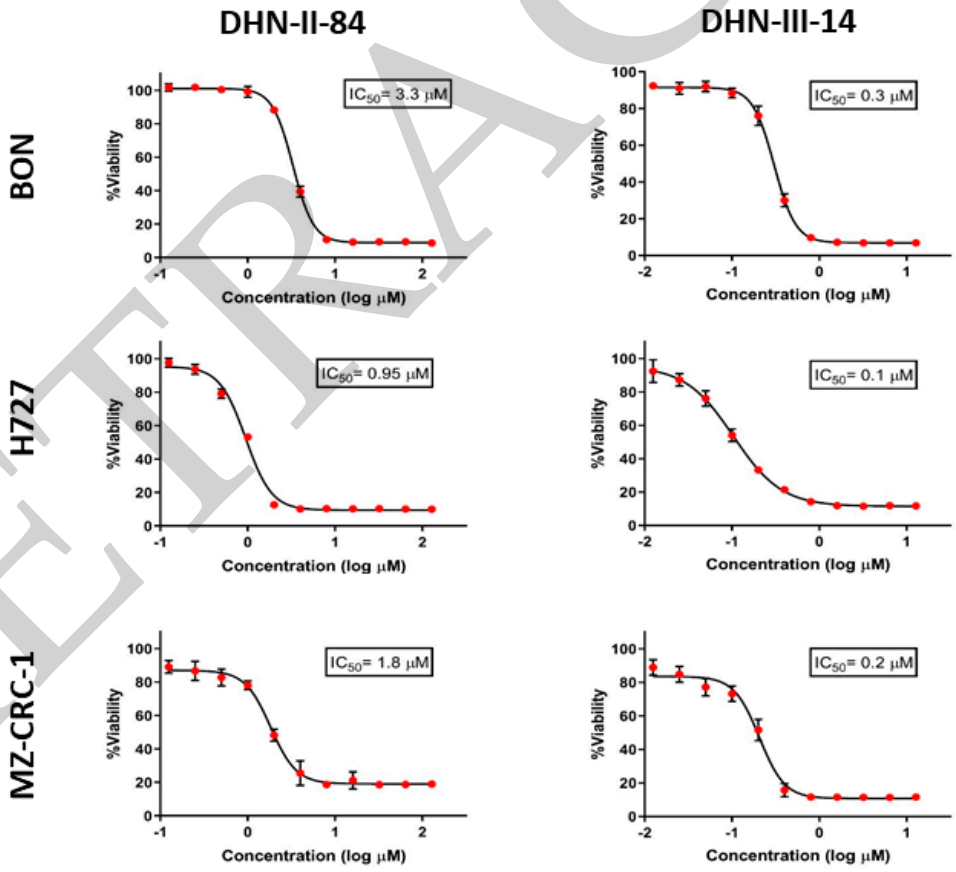

Figure 4. The IC_{50} values for DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 determined by CellTiter-Glo cell cytotoxicity assay against neuroendocrine cell lines H727, MZ-CRC-1 and BON. Experiments were performed in quadruplicates and data are plotted as mean ± SEM.

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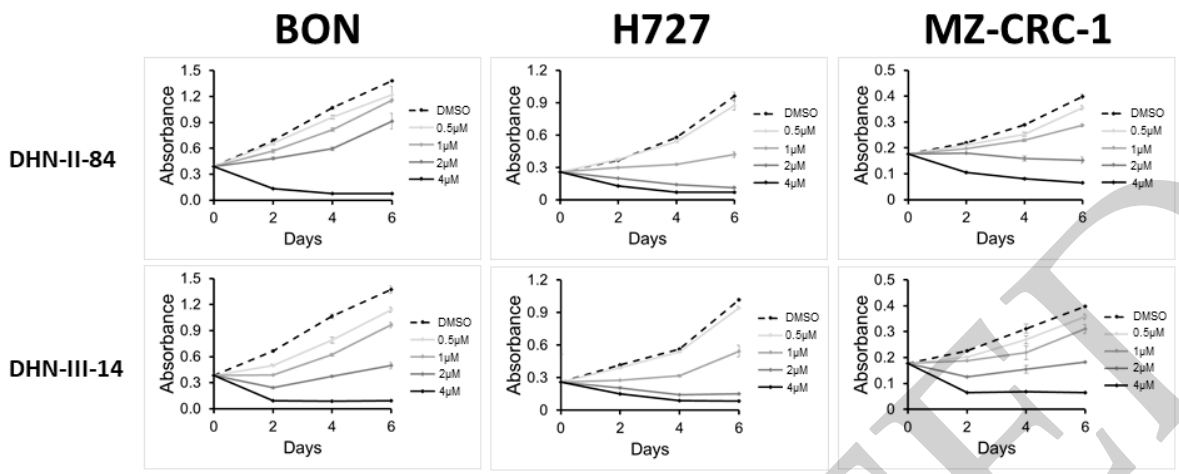

Figure 5. DNH-II-84 and DNH-III-14 inhibit neuroendocrine cell proliferation. BON, H727 and MZ-CRC-1 cell lines were treated with increasing concentrations of DNH-II-84 and DNH-III-14 (0–4 μM). Absorbance was measured on day 0, 2, 4 and 6 using MTT assay. Experiments were performed in quadruplicates and data are plotted as mean ± SEM.

2.2. *Makaluvamine Analogs Induce Apoptosis in NET Cells*

The ability of the makaluvamine analogs to induce apoptosis in BON, H727 and MZ-CRC-1 cell lines was determined after 48 h treatment with DHN-II-84 or DHN-III-14. Following treatment, cells were harvested, exposed to Annexin V, and analyzed by flow cytometry. A dose-dependent increase in cancer cell apoptosis was observed in all three cell lines (Figure 6A–C). These results were confirmed by Western blotting, which showed that the compound treatment decreased the expression of the anti-apoptotic marker MCL-1 in H727. Moreover, the expression of XIAP protein, which is an inhibitor of apoptosis, was decreased in all cancer cell lines except in BON cells treated with DHN-III-14, where no change of XIAP was detected (Figure 7).

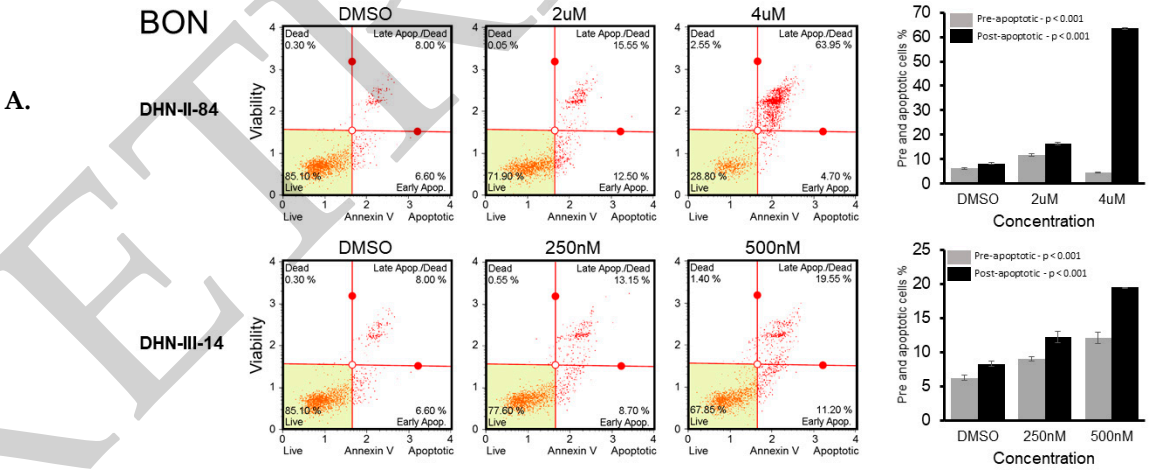

Figure 6. *Cont.*

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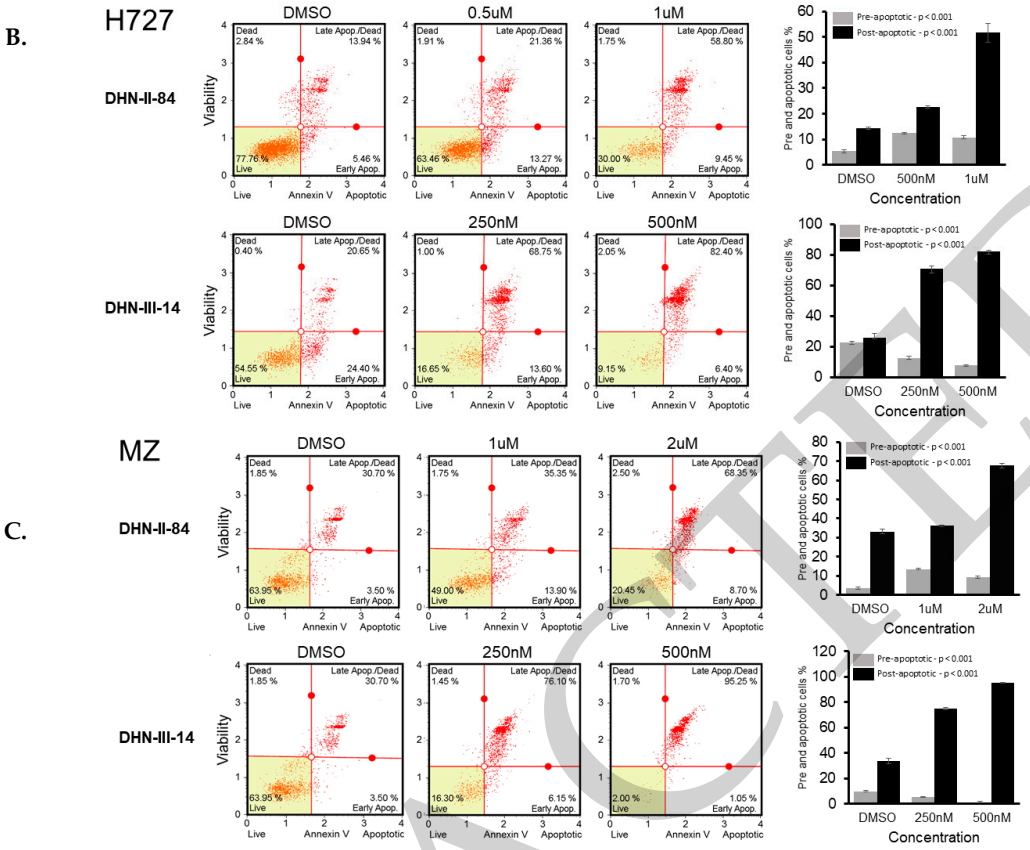

Figure 6. DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 increase apoptosis in neuroendocrine cancer cells. BON (**A**), H727 (**B**) and MZ-CRC-1 (**C**) cell lines were treated with increasing doses of DHN-II-84 and DNH-III-14, with half-maximum inhibitory concentration being the highest dose. A dose-dependent increase in apoptosis was observed in all cell lines. The highest response to the drug treatment was seen in MZ-CRC-1 when treated with DHN-III-14 (**C**), and the lowest response was seen with BON treated with DHN-II-14 (**A**). Bar graphs represent the mean of pre- and post-apoptotic cells ± SEM. Measurements were performed in triplicates. Statistical differences of pre- and post-apoptotic cells after treatment were determined by one-way ANOVA.

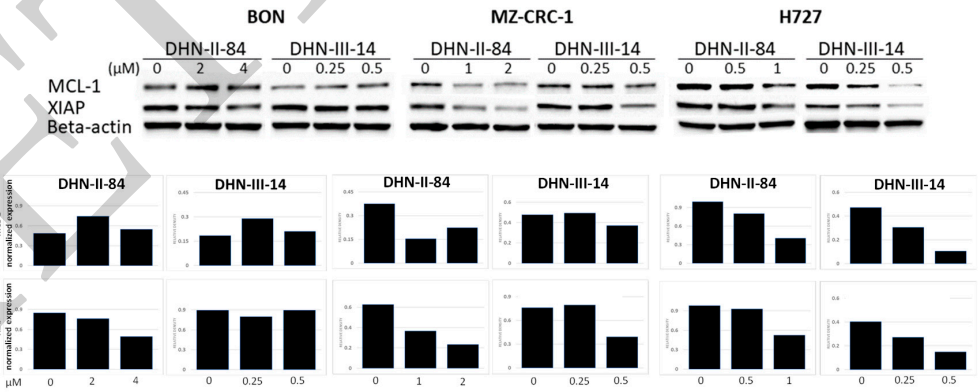

Figure 7. DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decrease antiapoptotic markers in neuroendocrine cancer cells. Protein levels of MCL-1 and XIAP were evaluated by Western blotting after 48 h of treatment. MCL-1, myeloid cell leukemia-1; XIAP, X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis protein. Both antiapoptotic markers decreased in MZ-CRC-1 and H727 cell lines. Only DHN-II-84 treatment in BON cell line decreased XIAP. Densitometry graphs of MCL-1 and XIAP protein levels normalized to beta-actin band intensity levels. Relative density levels shown after treatment.

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2.3. Makaluvamine Analogs Decrease NET Markers

Pancreatic and pulmonary neuroendocrine cancer cell lines, BON and H727, respectively, were assessed for changes in the expression of NET markers following the treatment with the makaluvamine analogs. Chromogranin A (CgA) and achaete-scute complex homolog 1 (ASCL1), were expressed in both cell lines at the baseline. CgA is a member of the granin family, which is found in secretory granules, and plays an important role in the formation and excretion of synaptic vesicles [28]. Its specificity for NETs is relatively low owing to many factors, such as artificial elevation from proton pump inhibitor use, or renal and hepatic insufficiency [29,30]. The lack of specificity limits the application of CgA for diagnostic purposes, but it is still a useful biomarker for surveillance or for evaluating the effectiveness of therapy [31]. ASCL-1 is a basic helix-loop-helix transcription factor that is highly expressed in NETs and is associated with poor prognosis. Treatment with DHN-II-84 or DHN-III-14 decreased both CgA and ASCL1 in a dose-dependent manner (Figure 8).

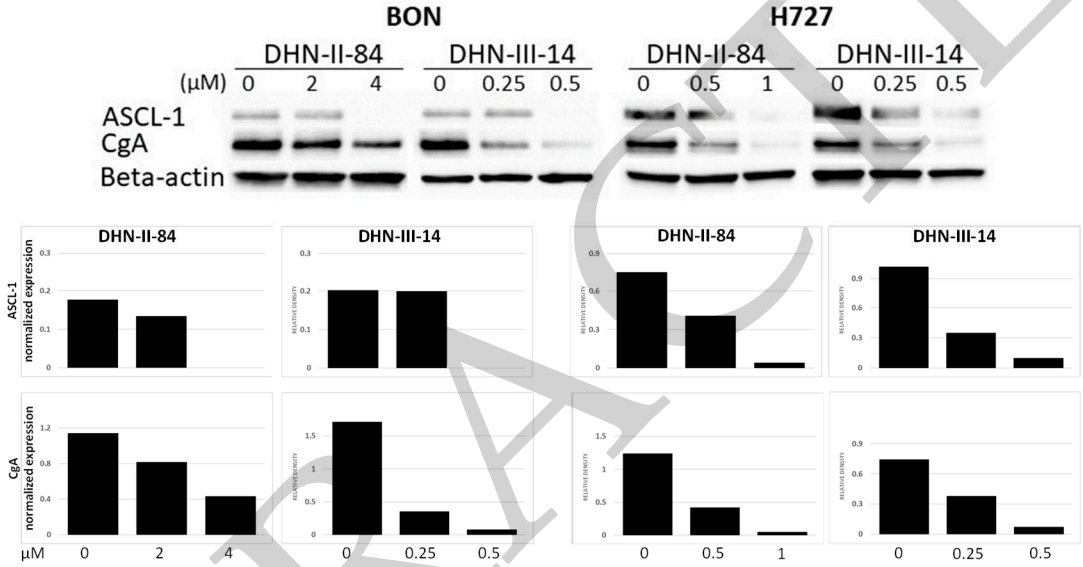

Figure 8. DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decrease neuroendocrine tumor markers in cancer cell lines. A dose-dependent decrease in neuroendocrine tumor markers was observed in BON and H727 cell lines. ASCL-1, achaete-scute homolog 1; CgA, chromogranin A. Protein bands normalized to beta-actin. Relative protein band intensities shown after treatment.

2.4. Makaluvamine Analogs Decrease c-Kit Expression

In addition to measuring ASCL-1 protein levels, we assessed the changes in expression of other genes in BON, MZ-CRC-1 and H727 cells after treatment with increasing doses of DHN-II-84 or DHN-III-14. The analysis was carried out by a Bio-Rad RT-qPCR neuroendocrine cancer panel, plated with primers for the genes that are known to be expressed in neuroendocrine cancer cells. Overall, compound DHN-II-84 induced higher changes in mRNA expression compared to DHN-III-14. The percentage of genes differentially induced by more than two-fold was 29% and 3% in DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 treated cells, respectively. A two or more-fold decrease in differential gene expression was noted in 34% and 19% of total genes in cells treated with DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14, respectively. The expression of c-Kit was found to have the biggest decrease among all oncogenes tested in the NET panel. Treatment with DNH-III-14 decreased c-Kit expression by almost three-fold; therefore, we decided to further explore the effect of the compounds on c-Kit expression in neuroendocrine cancer cell lines.

BON, MZ-CRC-1 and H727 cells were treated with increasing doses of the compounds for 72 h and the mRNA level of c-Kit was analyzed by RT-qPCR. A dose-dependent decrease in c-Kit expression was observed in all three cell lines (Figure 9). The change in c-Kit expression was statistically significant

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in all cell lines except in MZ-CRC-1 with half-IC_{50} treatment, where the expression of c-Kit decreased the least overall (Figure 9A). The biggest reduction in c-Kit expression was observed in BON cells after treatment with 2 μM and 4 μM of DHN-II-84 (93% and 95%, respectively, $p < 0.001$) (Figure 9B). In H727, half-IC_{50} concentration of DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decreased c-Kit expression by 63% and 60%, respectively ($p < 0.05$) (Figure 9C). Treatment with DHN-II-84 or DHN-III-14 decreased the expression of c-Kit in a dose-dependent manner (Figure 9D).

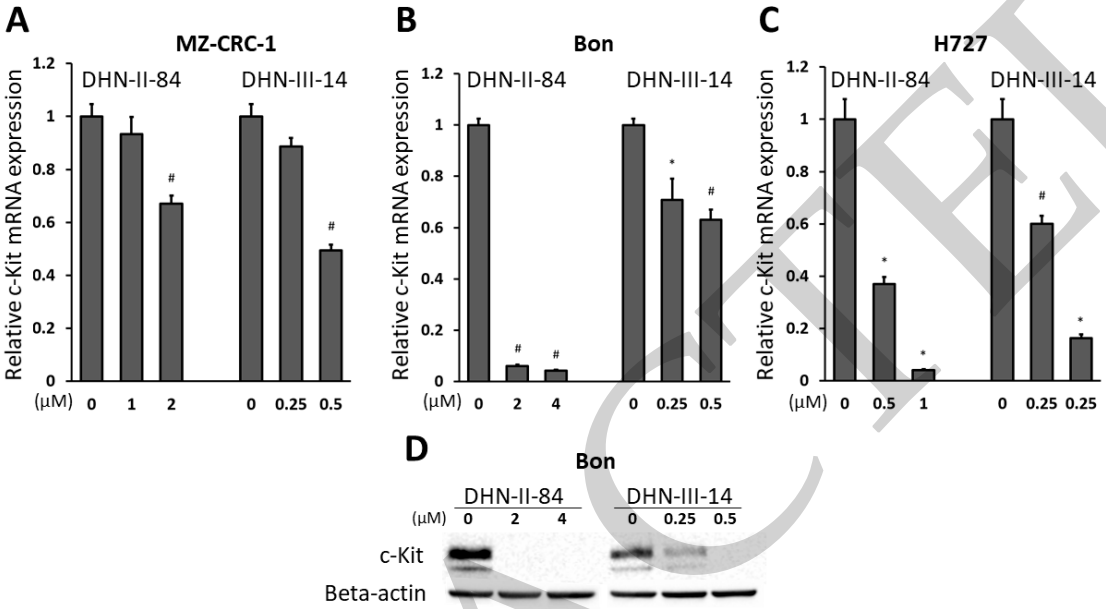

Figure 9. DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decrease c-Kit expression in MZ-CRC-1 (**A**), BON (**B**) and H727 (**C**) cells. The mRNA level of c-Kit was quantified by RT-qPCR in the cell lines following the treatment with DNH-II-84 and DNH-III-14 with half-IC_{50} and IC_{50} concentrations. The expression levels of mRNA are plotted relative to no treatment. All values are presented as mean relative fold ± SEM (* $p < 0.05$ and # $p < 0.01$). (**D**) Western blot demonstrating a basal expression level of c-Kit protein in BON cells and its reduction with DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 treatment.

3. Discussion

Natural products are a significant source of chemotherapeutic agents. Many chemotherapeutics such as doxorubicin, paclitaxel, vinblastine, etoposide, and gemcitabine are derived from plants or other natural sources [32,33]. In fact, more than 70% of antitumor agents are reported to be either natural products or derived from a natural product scaffold [13]. Marine sponges are known to produce a wide variety of chemical compounds that have therapeutic potential [34]. Two of the first marine-derived drugs developed for cancer treatment are vidarabine and cytarabine [35]. More recently, drug discovery has undergone many changes that have led pharmaceutical companies to focus more on rational drug design and combinatorial chemistry, rather than exploring natural compounds. However, the advancement in sample collection technologies, high-throughput screening, and spectroscopic techniques has shifted some interest back to natural product-based drug discovery [36].

Makaluvamine analogs (DNH-II-84 and DNH-III-14) described in this manuscript have demonstrated cytotoxic effects on NET cell lines and a reduction in secreted NET markers. Several mechanisms by which makaluvamines exhibit their antitumor effects have already been described. They were first reported to induce cytotoxic activity by inhibiting topoisomerase II, reductive DNA cleavage and DNA intercalation [18–21,25]. In addition, they have been shown to reduce a tumor's ability to adjust to hypoxic conditions via inhibition of the HIF-1α pathway [37]. Makaluvamines have also been shown to induce apoptosis in pancreatic, ovarian, prostate and breast cancer cell lines [21–24,26]. More recently, they have been reported to produce their antitumor effects

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by inhibiting MDM2 and NFAT1 [21–24]. Our initial screening and subsequent cytotoxicity assays revealed that the IC_{50} values of compounds DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 ranged from 0.5 μM to 4 μM. These values are comparable to the previous screening results in colorectal, breast, ovarian and pancreatic cancers, where the lowest IC_{50} values ranged from 0.29 μM to 2.9 μM [38,39]. Both DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 induced apoptosis in all three tested neuroendocrine cell lines at IC_{50} concentrations. Western blotting confirmed that DHN-II-84 decreased the anti-apoptotic protein, XIAP, in BON and H727 cell lines. Moreover, both compounds decreased another anti-apoptotic protein, MCL-1, in H727 cells, suggesting that apoptosis is the mechanism of NET cell growth inhibition.

In addition, both DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decreased CgA and ASCL-1 in BON and H727 cell lines. This finding, together with the compound's cytotoxicity, suggests that DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 may have the ability to alleviate the symptoms of carcinoid syndrome. CgA is a secretory protein and is involved in the formation of secretory granules, pro-hormone transport and replenishing the secretory granules in the cells [40]. CgA and the transcription factor ASCL-1, along with other neuroendocrine biomarkers, are often used to assess tumor burden and response to therapy [41–43].

Another mechanism by which these makaluvamine analogs reduce cancer cell viability could be by the inhibition of c-Kit expression. The KIT gene, which is also known as CD117, provides the template for c-Kit, a type III receptor tyrosine kinase that is involved in the regulation of important cellular processes such as proliferation, survival, differentiation, migration and apoptosis [44,45]. The role of c-Kit in cancer is mainly proto-oncogenic, and it has been reported that 78% of all gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GISTs) and over 90% of systemic mastocytosis myeloid neoplasms carry c-Kit mutations [46,47]. The c-Kit mutation has also been seen in acute myeloid leukemias and seminomas [48,49]. Activation of c-Kit stimulates multiple signaling pathways, such as JAK/STAT, RAS/MAPK, and PI3K/AKT, which lead to cell proliferation, survival, adhesion, and angiogenesis [50]. Other investigators have shown that neuroendocrine cancer patients demonstrate overexpression of c-Kit and can benefit from the inhibition of this gene. Della Torre et al. demonstrated that c-Kit was highly expressed in 36% and 13% of poorly and well-differentiated NETs, respectively. Moreover, the c-Kit positive tumors showed a high proliferating index, which could serve as a prognostic marker [51]. Another study showed that the c-Kit receptor is significantly overexpressed in the Large Cell Neuroendocrine Carcinoma (LCNEC) (61%) and its positivity seems to be related to poor survival. They have also shown that overexpression of c-Kit was significantly related to the recurrence rate: 60% versus 23% for c-Kit positive and negative LCNEC, respectively [52]. Additional immunohistochemical studies using a polyclonal antibody against c-Kit protein demonstrated a strong staining in 23% of colorectal neuroendocrine carcinomas [53]. Overall, this marker may represent the basic rationale to select neuroendocrine tumors positive for c-Kit and stratify patients eligible for novel anti-c-Kit therapy.

Our results show that the compounds DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 decrease c-Kit message and protein expression at low micromolar concentrations, suggesting this as a possible mechanism for their oncotoxicity.

4. Methods

4.1. Cell Culture and Treatment

Human pancreatic NET cell line (BON) was kindly provided by Dr. Mark Hellmich (The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, Galveston, TX, USA). Human bronchopulmonary carcinoid cell line (H727) was purchased from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA). Human medullary thyroid cancer cell line (MZ-CRC-1) was kindly provided by Dr. Gilbert Cote (MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX, USA), and human medullary thyroid cancer cell line (TT) was provided by Dr. Barry D. Nelkin (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA). These cell lines were maintained as previously described [54–56]. All compounds tested in this study were synthesized in the Velu lab and used as 10 mM stock solutions in DMSO.

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4.2. Cell Viability Assay

MTT assay: The ability of the compounds to suppress cell proliferation was initially measured by 3-[4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) assays (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). Screening of the compounds was accomplished by plating NET cells on 24-well plates overnight at 60% confluence. Cells were treated in triplicates with varying doses (0–100 μM) of the compounds. After 48 h of treatment, the media was replaced with 250 μL of serum-free media containing 0.5 mg/mL MTT, and cells were incubated at 37 °C for 3 h. After adding 750 μL of DMSO, the absorbance was measured at λ 540 nm using an ELx800 Absorbance Reader (BioTek, Winooski, VT, USA). After selecting the most potent compounds, proliferation curves were produced (GraphPad Software Inc, San Diego, CA, USA) with treatments lasting up to 6 days at doses close to the compound's half maximal inhibitory concentrations (IC_{50}). For the initial screening, we used TT cells to assess the toxicity of makaluvamine compounds on medullary thyroid cancer. For all consequent experiments, another medullary thyroid cancer cell line, MZ-CRC-1, was used. Ninety-six well plates were seeded with 2000 cells/well of BON or H727. The MZ-CRC-1 and TT cells proliferate at a slower rate than BON and H727 cell lines, and because of this we seeded them at 6000 cells/well. All cell lines had the same confluency in the non-treated wells during the time of colorimetric cell viability measurement. DMSO was used as a control.

4.3. CellTiter-Glo Cell Viability Assay

Cells were seeded in the tissue culture microtiter 96-well plates at a density of 5000 cells/well and incubated under standard conditions (5% CO_2 at 37 °C) overnight prior to treatment. On the day of treatment, a 2-log dose range of test compounds were added to the cells. Once the treatment was completed, cells were incubated for 72 h. The growth inhibitory activity of compounds was determined by the measurement of ATP levels, an indicator of the number of viable cells (CellTiter-Glo assay, Promega Corporation, Madison, WI, USA). Dose response curves and IC_{50} values were calculated using GraphPad Prism software (GraphPad Software Inc, San Diego, CA, USA).

4.4. Western Blot Analysis

After treating the cells for 48 h with each compound, protein lysates were isolated as previously described. Protein concentrations were quantified by a Pierce® BCA Protein Assay Kit (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA), following the manufacturer's instructions. Proteins were mixed at 1:1 in 2× Leammli Sample Buffer (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA), and freshly diluted with 5% 2-Mercaptoethanol (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Boston, MA, USA). Proteins were boiled at 100 °C for 5 min and then run on 4–15% Criterion TGX gradient gels (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA) by electrophoresis. Proteins were then transferred onto a nitrocellulose membrane (Bio-Rad Laboratories). Membranes were blocked in 5% nonfat milk solution for 1.5 h and incubated with appropriate primary antibodies at 4 °C overnight. Primary antibodies MCL-1 (Cell Signaling, catalog #: 4572), XIAP (Cell Signaling, catalog #: 2042), beta-actin (Cell Signaling, catalog #: 49702), chromogranin-A (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, catalog # 376827), ASCL-1 (BD Pharmingen, catalog #: 556604), c-Kit (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Catalog # sc-365504) were used at a ratio of 1:1000. The next day, membranes were washed and then incubated for 2 h at room temperature with horseradish peroxidase-conjugated anti-rabbit/mouse secondary antibodies with a dilution of 1:1000 (Cell Signaling). Immunoreactive protein bands were detected by following horseradish peroxidase (HRP) substrates: Luminata Classico, Luminata Crescendo or Luminata Forte (MilliporeSigma, Darmstadt, Germany).

4.5. Flow Cytometry

Cells were plated on 10 cm^2 Petri dishes and incubated for 24 h. After 48 h of treatment with increasing doses of DHN-II-14 and DHN-III-84, cells were harvested and resuspended in 1% fetal bovine serum (FBS) to the final concentration of between 1×10^5 and 5×10^5 cells/mL. The cell

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suspension in the volume of 100 µL was then mixed with 100 µL Muse™ Annexin V Dead Cell reagent (EMD Millipore Corporation, Billerica, MA, USA). After gently mixing by pipetting, the cells were incubated in the dark at room temperature for 20 min. The cell apoptosis was quantified using a Muse® Cell Analyzer (Millipore-Sigma, Darmstadt, Germany).

4.6. Quantitative Reverse-Transcription PCR (qRT-PCR)

Cells were plated on Petri dishes at 50% confluency and treated with IC_{50} (half maximal inhibitory) concentrations of compounds 24 h after plating. After 48 h of the treatment, total RNA was harvested using an RNeasy Plus Mini Kit (Qiagen, Valencia, VA, Spain), and RNA concentrations were determined by a NanoDrop 1000 spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Wilmington, DE, USA). Complementary DNA was synthesized from 2 µg of total RNA using an iScript cDNA Synthesis Kit (Bio-Rad Laboratories). Predesigned 96-well plates of neuroendocrine panel were used (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA). Real-time quantitative reverse transcription PCR (RT-qPCR) was performed by a CFX Connect Real-Time PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad Laboratories). The results of the experiments were analyzed on Bio-Rad CFX Manager 3.1 (Bio-Rad Laboratories). The sequence of c-Kit primers used for the validation of c-Kit expression are as follows: forward 5′-TGGGCCACCGTTTGGAAAGCT-3′; reverse 5′-AGGGTGTGGGGATGGATTTGCTCT-3′.

4.7. Statistical Analysis

Data are expressed as mean ± SEM. A two tailed *t*-test and one-way ANOVA was used where appropriate. All statistical analyses were carried out using R software (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria) and Bio-Rad CFX Manager 3.1 (Bio-Rad Laboratories). Student's *t*-test (two-sided) and one-way ANOVA were used to evaluate differences between two groups and among multiple groups, respectively. *p*-values of <0.05 were considered to be significant. All experiments were repeated at least in triplicates.

4.8. Synthesis of DHN-III-14 and DHN-II-84

Compounds DHN-III-14 and DHN-II-84 were synthesized from the tricyclic pyrroloiminoquinone 1, as shown in Figure 10. Compound **1** was prepared following the 4,6,7-trimethoxyindole approach described previously [57]. Treatment of compound **1** with 3,4-dimethoxybenzyl amine (2) in MeOH at room temperature afforded the compound DHN-III-14 in a 66% yield [58]. Treatment of compound **1** with 4-(N,N-dimethylamino)benzyl amine (3) in MeOH at room temperature afforded the compound **4**, which without further characterization, was treated with NaOMe in MeOH to afford DHN-II-84 in a 41% yield for two steps. Both final products DHN-III-14 and DHN-II-84 were completely characterized, and purity was confirmed by ^{1}H-NMR, ^{13}C-NMR, and MS spectroscopy.

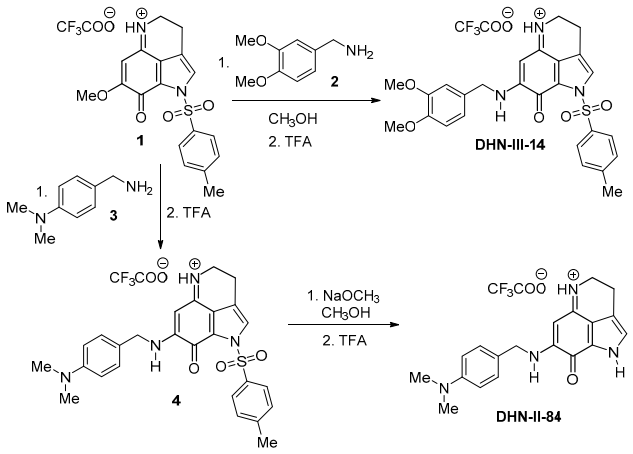

Figure 10. Synthesis of test compounds DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14.

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4.9. Experimental Procedure

3,4-Dihydro-7-(3,4-dimethoxybenzylamino)-1-(tosyl)-pyrrolo[4,3,2-de]quinolin-8(1*H*)-one (DHN-III-14): To a solution of compound **1** (0.080 g, 0.17 mmol) in MeOH (20 mL), a solution of 3,4-dimethoxybenzylamine 2 (0.034 g, 0.20 mmol) in anhydrous MeOH (5 mL) was added drop-wise over a period of 10 min. The resulting solution was stirred at room temperature for 20 h. Thin layer chromatography (TLC) analysis MeOH/$CHCl_3$ (1:20) revealed the completion of reaction. The reaction mixture was then cooled to 0 °C and quenched by adding trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) (2 equiv.). It was allowed to attain room temperature and was stirred for 30 min. Then, the solvent was removed under reduced pressure, co-evaporated with $CHCl_3$ to remove excess TFA, and the residue was purified by flash column chromatography on silica gel with MeOH/$CHCl_3$ (1:40) as eluent to furnish pure DHN-III-14 (0.068 g, 66%); ^{1}H-NMR ($CDCl_3$) δ 2.45 (s, 3H), 2.97 (t, 2H, *J* = 7.4 Hz), 3.88 (s, 6H), 3.98 (t, 2H, *J* = 7.4 Hz), 4.38 (d, 2H, *J* = 5.6 Hz), 6.28 (s, 1H), 6.81(s, 1H), 6.86 (s, 2H), 7.02 (bs, 1H), 7.38 (d, 2H, *J* = 8.2 Hz), 7.67 (s, 1H) and 8.02 (d, 2H, *J* = 8.2 Hz); ^{13}C-NMR ($CDCl_3$) δ 18.0, 21.9, 42.5, 48.2, 55.9, 56.0, 87.7, 111.4, 111.5, 118.0, 121.0, 123.1, 126.5, 127.8, 128.2, 129.0(2C), 130.2(2C), 132.9, 147.3, 149.5, 149.4, 150.1, 156.9 and 166.6; MS (ES+) *m/z* (M+) 492.

3,4-Dihydro-7-((4-dimethylamino)benzylamino)-pyrrolo[4,3,2-de]quinolin-8(1H)-one (DHN-II-84): compound **4** was prepared by following a similar procedure as the one in the synthesis of DHN-III-14, starting from compound **1** (0.10 g, 0.21 mmol) in MeOH (25 mL) and 4-dimethylaminobenzylamine (0.038 g, 0.25 mmol). The crude product 4 obtained from this reaction was dissolved in MeOH (15 mL), NaOMe (0.091 g, 1.7 mmol) was added and stirred for 45 min. TLC analysis MeOH/$CHCl_3$ (1:20) revealed that the reaction was complete. The resulting solution was cooled to 0 °C, quenched with TFA (2 equiv.) and stirred further at room temperature for 30 min. The solvent was evaporated off under reduced pressure and the residue was co-evaporated three times with $CHCl_3$ to remove excess TFA. The crude product obtained was then purified by flash column chromatography over Si gel using MeOH/$CHCl_3$ (1:20) as eluent to obtain the pure DHN-II-84 (0.038 g, 41%); ^{1}H-NMR (CD_3OD) δ 2.93 (s, 6H), 2.96 (t, 2H, *J* = 7.6 Hz), 3.83 (t, 2H, *J* = 7.6 Hz), 4.48 (s, 2H), 5.46 (s, 1H), 6.78 (d, 2H, *J* = 8.4 Hz), 7.15 (s, 1H), 7.19 (d, 2H, *J* = 8.4 Hz); ^{13}C-NMR (CD_3OD) δ 19.5, 41.0, 44.2, 47.9, 86.2, 114.3 (2C), 120.2, 123.9, 124.9, 125.6, 127.1, 129.5 (2C), 151.9, 155.0, 159.7 and 168.9; MS (ES+) *m/z* 321 (M+).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we have evaluated the antitumor activities of a library of 18 drug-like compounds against pulmonary (H727) and thyroid (MZ-CRC-1 and TT) neuroendocrine tumor derived cell lines. Two makaluvamine analogs, DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14, were identified as potent lead compounds from this screening. We further characterized the antitumor activities of these two compounds using H727, MZ-CRC-1 and pancreatic (BON) neuroendocrine tumor cell lines. Flow cytometry showed a dose-dependent increase in apoptosis in all cell lines. Induction of apoptosis with these compounds was also supported by the decrease in MCL-1 and XIAP, detected by Western blot. Compound treatment decreased NET markers chromogranin A (CgA) and achaete-scute homolog 1 (ASCL1) in a dose-dependent manner. Moreover, the gene expression analysis showed that the compound treatment reduced c-Kit proto-oncogene expression in the NET cell lines. Induction of apoptosis may be caused by the inhibition of c-Kit expression, in addition to the known mechanisms for this class of compounds, such as DNA damage by topoisomerase II, MDM2 and NFAT1 inhibition. Further studies are needed to shed more light in this direction and determine the precise mechanism of action, as well as to establish the in vivo safety profile of the two makaluvamine analogs presented here. In summary, DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 showed promising antitumor activity against tested human neuroendocrine tumor cell lines and hold potential to be developed as an effective treatment to combat neuroendocrine tumors.

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Supplementary Materials: The following are available online. Figure S1: The IC_{50} values of DHN-II-84 and DHN-III-14 in non-cancerous WI-38 and 917 cell lines as determined by CellTiter-Glo assay. Experiments were performed in quadruplicate and individual data points are plotted as mean ± SEM.

Author Contributions: R.J.-S. and S.E.V. conceptualized the research idea; Z.A. and S.J. designed/performed the experiments and analyzed the data. Z.A. wrote the paper. J.D.W. contributed to data analysis along with technical assistance and preparation of the figures. S.E.V. and D.H.N. designed and synthesized the compounds. H.C., J.B.R., and R.J.-S. contributed to experimental design and scientific discussions. R.J.-S. and S.E.V. oversaw the overall direction of the project. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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