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## A consensus protocol for the *in silico* optimisation of antibody fragments<sup>†</sup>

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**We present an *in silico* mutagenetic protocol for improving the binding affinity of single domain antibodies (or nanobodies, VHHs). The method iteratively attempts random mutations in the interacting region of the protein and evaluates the resulting binding affinity towards the target by scoring, with a collection of scoring functions, short explicit solvent molecular dynamics trajectories of the binder-target complexes. The acceptance/rejection criterion of each attempted mutation is carried out by a consensus decision-making algorithm, which considers all individual assessments derived from each scoring function. The method was benchmarked by evolving a single complementary determining region (CDR) of an anti-HER2 VHH hit obtained by direct panning of a phage display library. The optimised VHH mutant showed significantly enhanced experimental affinity with respect to the original VHH it matured from. The protocol can be employed as it is for the optimization of peptides, antibody fragments, and (given enough computational power) of larger antibodies.**

The discovery and optimization of antibodies has become an essential tool in nanomedicine and nanotechnology<sup>1,2</sup>. Indeed, the number of new medical applications involving antibodies is constantly growing, as different nude antibodies, antibody-functionalized nanoparticles and effective antibody-drug conjugates (ADCs) have entered clinical trials and have been approved for clinical applications<sup>3</sup>. Antibodies engineering has evolved towards improving the production of more efficient immunogens.

With respect to the past, there is more attention to conjugation procedures aimed at obtaining more homogeneous products. The possibility to control and model the macromolecule functionalization is one of the reasons for which recombinant antibody fragments represent a nimbly alternative to full-length IgGs<sup>2,4</sup>. They offer unique opportunities as reagents for super-resolution microscopy<sup>5,6</sup> and are easier to treat with computational approaches<sup>7-9</sup>. Among the different types of antibody fragments, the single domain antibodies, or nanobodies (VHHs), are the smallest fragments which still preserve the binding capacity of the whole original antibody they derive from<sup>2,10</sup>.

The major issues that any computational design approach must deal with is the accuracy in the evaluation of the binder-target binding affinity, an essential feature for selecting the optimum binders<sup>11,12</sup>. The use of scoring functions (SFs) to evaluate the interaction between proteins is a particularly convenient approach<sup>13</sup>. Despite the broad variety of available SFs and the constant development of new ones, no "golden standard" has emerged yet. Indeed, SFs are developed by following different philosophies, employing different experimental databases, and different procedures to compute the interactions between atoms or group of atoms. The accuracy of SFs is typically system dependent. Since the evaluation of the binding affinity by SFs is often affected by large errors the employment of consensus scores has been proposed<sup>14,15</sup>. This approach often improves the accuracy with respect to individual SFs, but generally relies on the deter-

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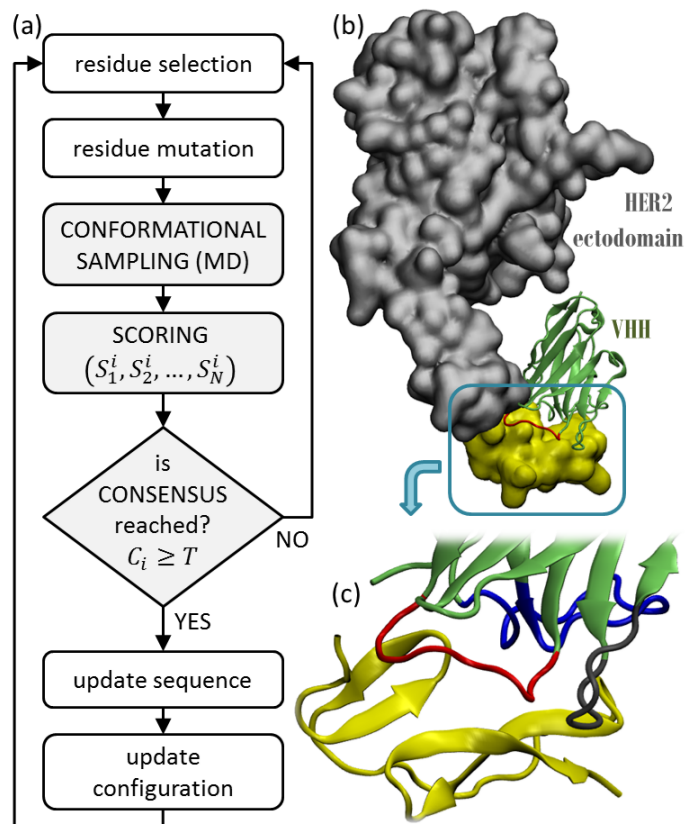
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mination of system-dependent weights.



**Fig. 1** (a) Algorithm diagram; (b) Starting binding conformation between D9 (green) and HER2 ectodomain (yellow/gray), and (c) close-up on the HER2 the domain employed in the design simulations with highlighted CDR1 (red, to be optimized), CDR2 (gray), CDR3 (blue).

Here we present an iterative mutagenic protocol for the *in silico* maturation of proteic binders based on a parameter-free consensus optimization (Figure 1a). We believe that this approach could enable the rational design of stronger protein-ligands for the design of novel nanodevices<sup>16</sup> and for single molecule experiments<sup>17</sup>. The protocol differs from formerly proposed algorithms in that it does not rely on structural databases<sup>8,9,18</sup>. Instead, building on previous experience in peptide design<sup>19–22</sup>, it relies on the scoring of molecular dynamics (MD) trajectories in explicit solvent. The most important novelty of the protocol is in the consideration of several SFs to evaluate the binding affinity between each binder and its target, making consensus decisions based on an a parameter-free combination of all binding scores. As the binding scores are proxies for the binding free energy (i.e. the larger the binding affinity, the lower the score) the protocol, implemented in a iterative scheme, allows improving the theoretical binding affinity for all the SFs at the same time.

To benchmark the method we optimize a single CDR of a hit VHH known to bind HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor 2) with unsatisfactory dissociation constant ( $k_d=900\text{nM}$ , Figure 1b-c)<sup>14</sup>. The general approach requires the knowledge of the macromolecule structures involved (real or derived). We thus started from a VHH, named D9, modeled by homology modeling and docked to HER2, for which the crystal structure was avail-

able<sup>14,23</sup>.

The consensus-based protocol starts from the above conformation  $i$  comprising two interacting proteins prepared as in Supplementary Information, Section S1 (Figures S1-S4). One first performs a finite temperature MD simulation in water solvent, followed by the computation of  $N_s$  trajectory-averaged binding scores  $S_1^i, S_2^i, \dots, S_{N_s}^i$ . One then subsequently performs: (i) an attempted mutation of one randomly selected residue of the binding region thus generating a new complex  $i+1$ ; (ii) a finite temperature MD simulation of the complex  $i+1$  in water solvent; (iii) the computation of  $N_s$  trajectory-averaged binding scores  $S_1^{i+1}, S_2^{i+1}, \dots, S_{N_s}^{i+1}$ ; (iv) the comparison between each  $k$ -th binding score obtained for the complex  $i+1$  with that computed for the complex  $i$  and the construction of a score vector  $\vec{S}_i = \{c_k^i\}$  of dimension  $N_s$ , where:

$$c_k^i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } S_k^{i+1} - S_k^i < 0 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

The  $i$ -th mutation is accepted if

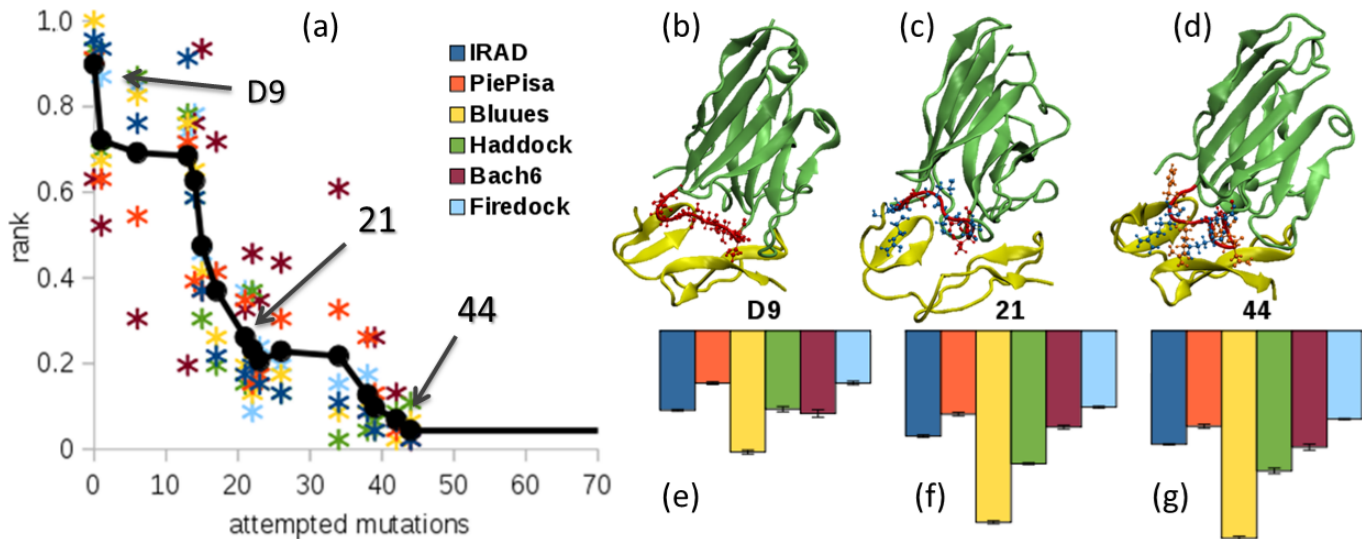
$$C^i = \sum_{k=1}^{N_s} c_k^i \geq T \quad (2)$$

where  $T$  is an integer number between 0 and  $N_s$ , and rejected if  $C^i < T$ . The parameters of this approach are the number  $N_s$  of SFs, and the value of  $T$ .

In the particular case of VHH optimization we set  $N_s = 6$ : in our former work<sup>14</sup> we have identified six different SFs capable of reproducing with good accuracy the experimental binding affinity ranks of VHHs sets<sup>11</sup>. Although a higher number of SFs would allow a higher number of combinations to achieve the consensus criterion, this would also require a higher number of concurrent SFs to be computed and optimized. The consensus criterion establishes that one mutation is accepted if at least  $T$  binding scores are improved by the mutation, leading to  $\binom{N_s}{T}$  possible combinations to achieve this criterion. In Supplementary Information (Section S2, Figures S5-S6) we show that the optimal consensus threshold for our system is  $T = 3$ . With lower  $T$  the scores do not improve significantly, while with higher  $T$  they improve too slowly.

Overall the protocol requires choosing two parameters ( $N_s$  and  $T$ ) which may in principle be different in different systems. The six scoring functions used in this work were selected based on Ref.<sup>14</sup>. It could well be that for certain types of mutations (e.g. charged/uncharged residues), the addition of other SFs to the set might improve the final output. The protocol here proposed is modular as one may easily increase the library of SF as new ones become available.

A typical optimization is shown in Figure 2a. Here the tunable parameter  $T$  is set to  $T = 3$ , optimal consensus threshold for our system and our choice of SFs (Supplementary Information, Figures S5-S6). Another example, namely the optimisation of a peptide as a binder towards the same target, can be found in Supplementary Information (Section S3, Figures S7-S8) where the same SFs and  $T = 3$  have been employed validating the algorithm on a different system and demonstrating both the algorithm robustness and its general applicability. Being  $r_k^i$  the rank of a complex



**Fig. 2** (a) Global (black circles and line) and scoring-function specific (star) ranking scores of the bindings between VHH mutants and HER2 as obtained along the optimization with  $N_s = 6$ ,  $T = 3$ . Three selected mutants are indicated by arrows; (b-d) simulation snapshots of the three selected complexes. CDR1 amino acids are highlighted as follows: the same as in **D9** (red), mutated at step 21 with respect to **D9** (blue), mutated at step 44 with respect to **21** (orange); (e-g) binding scores averaged over MD simulations of the selected VHH/HER2 complexes, interval 150-250 ns, error bars are standard deviations calculated by block analysis. In this representation the units of the different scoring functions have been rescaled in order to make the relative variations visible.

$i$  according to the SFs  $k$ , we define

$$\hat{r}_k^i = \frac{r_k^i}{N} \quad (3)$$

where  $N$  is the total number of accepted mutations obtained in the runs. The average ranking score of a complex  $i$  is defined as

$$R^i = \frac{1}{N_s} \sum_{k=1, N_s} \hat{r}_k^i \quad ; \quad i = 1, N \quad (4)$$

Along the optimization both  $\hat{r}_k^i$  and  $R^i$  decrease and, after 44 attempted mutations, they reach a stationary state in which the SFs do not improve anymore, but still keep on changing due to stochastic fluctuations. The optimization performed with the consensus criterion allowed to reach a lowest predicted binding affinity than an equivalent Monte Carlo (MC) optimization performed by using a single score (details in Supplementary Information, Section S4, Figure S9). The MC optimization brings to a gradual decrease of the score which is optimized, but most of the other scores are uncontrolled and do not change significantly. With the same computational effort, our protocol was capable of optimizing all the scores simultaneously.

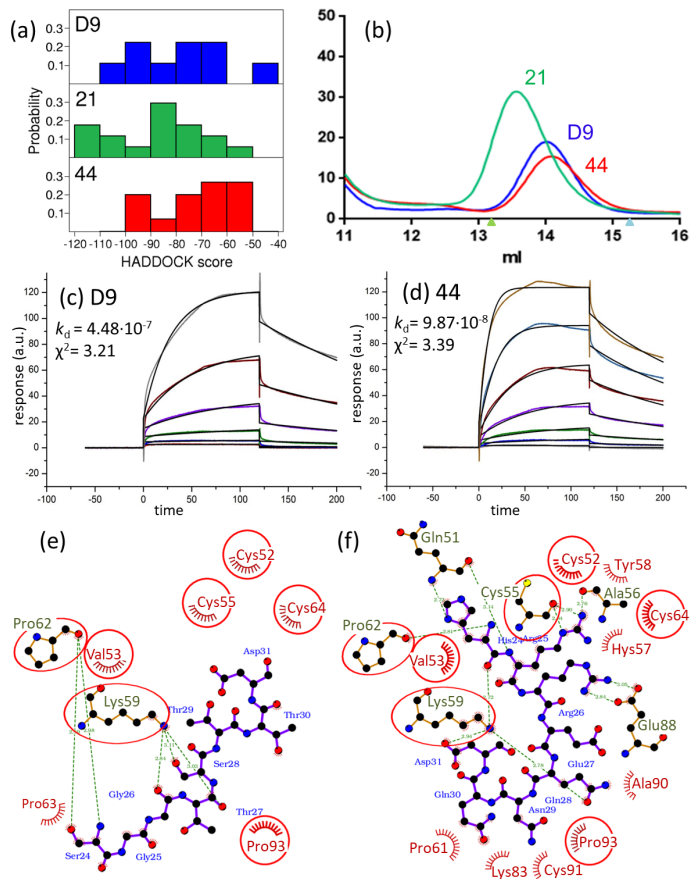
To choose the optimum binder to undergo experimental validation we selected the lowest ranking solutions along the optimization (mutants **21-44** with sequences in Supplementary Information, Section S5, Table S1) and performed 200 ns MD simulations in water solvent at 330 K (further computational details in Supplementary Information, Section S6 and S8). Simulation snapshots reveal how successive mutations allow the VHH to extend its side chains into the target structure, thus maximizing the binding interface (Figure 2b-d). The SFs computations<sup>14</sup>, clearly reveals their lower value with respect to those computed for the initial complex (Figure S10). Their averages calculated over the

last 100 ns together with a small standard deviation, further confirm that result (Figure S11): for instance both the first and last selected mutant, **21** and **44**, are predicted to bind stronger than the original **D9** by all SFs (Figure 2e-g). We further estimated their yield<sup>7</sup>: while **21** was expected to be prone to aggregation, **44** was expected to be found in the same multimeric state as the original **D9** (see Figure 3a).

The selected mutants **21**, **44**, as well as **D9**, were cloned in a pET 14b expression vector; modified to generate a VHH-Cys-6His tag at the C-terminal domain and expressed in bacterial host. All proteins were expressed in a soluble form and were purified via IMAC followed by SEC, and shown to be present in the same (monomeric) oligomeric state (Figure 3b).

The VHH binding ability was then tested with an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) confirming the VHH/antigen recognition (Supplementary Information, Section S7, Figure S12), as well as through surface plasmon resonance (SPR). In SPR the VHHs were used as analyte, after the immobilization of the HER2-Fc via amine coupling. In this setup, the experimental  $K_d$  calculated for **D9** was in the low micromolar range (448 nM, Figure 3c) and, while **21** did not show any improvement over **D9** and was ill behaved at the SPR, the VHH **44** showed a fivefold  $K_d$  improvement over **D9** with a  $K_d$  in the nanomolar range (98 nM, Figure 3d).

A number of factors contributed to achieve this result (Figure 3e-f): (i) most of the original structural pattern of the binding to HER2 was maintained during the optimization: this pattern contains two hydrogen bonds and five out of six hydrophobic contacts; (ii) new strong directional interactions were formed: for example the two new arginines instead of glycines in position 25 and 26 now allow for hydrogen bonding with HER2 Cys55 and Glu88 (see Figure 3f); (iii) van der Waals interactions were maxi-



**Fig. 3** (a) Histogram of the probability of homodimer binding events for **D9**, **21**, and **44** sorted by their HADDOCK score. More negative scores are associated with aggregation likelihood; (b) their superimposed SEC profiles (**D9** blue line, **21** green line, **44** red line), molecular weight protein marker retention volume are also indicated (Cytochrome C, 12.4 kDa, dark green and Aprotinin, 6.4 kDa, cyan); (c-d) SPR profiles and affinity comparison between **D9** and **44**, curves were fitted by using the steady state affinity method (for **D9**) and the 1:1 Langmuir equation (**44**) (e-f) Schematic diagram of the interaction between HER2 and (a) **D9** and (b) **44**: protein residues interacting with the target by van der Waals interactions are highlighted in red, while hydrogen bonds in green. Equivalent HER2 binding amino acids are highlighted by circles.

mized passing from six hydrophobic contacts in **D9** to ten contacts in the final complex. Overall, the binding affinity increase shifted the original VHH  $K_d$  closer to the median of  $K_d$  distribution of the Structural Antibody Database (SAbDab)<sup>8</sup>, approximately located at 10 nM. Given the *a priori* lack of structural information (VHVs were built by homology modelling and complexes by docking) the achieved result is in itself remarkable. It highlights the importance of performing a correct sampling of the binding conformations along the design protocol to obtain accurate predictions of the mutants binding affinities.

In this work we have employed a cleaved domain to represent the target epitope. The length of such sequence will certainly affect the optimization process but a trade-off must be sought between available computing power (which might require a smaller fragment to be employed) and accuracy of the model (which might require describing explicitly the surrounding protein matrix).

Being aware of the current computational limitations in achieving high accuracy in the computational design, our protocol can be applied to practically any binder-target system, as similar old versions of the design approach have been used for peptide-drug<sup>19,20</sup> and peptide-protein<sup>21,22</sup> systems. The design of a complete antibody using our protocol requires more computational resources than structure-based combinatorial approaches<sup>8,18</sup>. However, High Performance Computing resources are more and more commonly available, making our approach a viable option if one wants to perform a high accuracy design, based on a quantitative control of the interaction pattern predicted by molecular dynamics.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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