

Quantum Chemical Study of the Relationships between Electronic Structure and Corticotropin-Releasing Factor 1 Receptor Binding Inhibition by a Group of Benzazole Derivatives

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Abstract: In this paper, we report the results of a study to find the relationships between electronic structure and corticotropin-releasing factor 1 receptor binding inhibition using the formal *Klopman-Peradejordi-Gómez* (KPG) method after full geometry optimization within the density functional theory (DFT) at the B3LYP/6-31g(d,p) level for a group of benzazole derivatives. Statistically significant equations were obtained. Interestingly, following the complete evaluations of the various electronic contributions of the individual molecular orbital (MO) descriptors to the binding inhibition of the benzazoles molecules investigated. The results demonstrate that the electronic interaction between the benzazole derivatives and the receptor is orbital-controlled. On the basis of the results obtained, we proposed a partial 2-dimensional pharmacophore with the contributing substituents properly positioned at the relevant molecular positions. The structural features of the proposed partial pharmacophore have the tendency to enhance its binding interaction with the receptor. The molecule-receptor interaction of the benzazoles studied herein is very complex in agreement to the high selectivity that the receptors must show to preserve the integrity of the biological system in which they are implanted.

Keywords: Benzimidazoles, QSAR, DFT, Electronic structure, Pharmacophore, Klopman-Peradejordi-Gómez method.

1 Introduction

Corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH, also known as corticotropin-releasing factor, CRF) is a peptide hormone involved in the pathophysiology of depression [1, 2]. It is a releasing hormone belonging to the corticotropin-releasing factor family. It corresponds to a 41-amino acid peptide derived from a 196-amino acid prohormone. CRH is secreted by the paraventricular nucleus of the mammalian hypothalamus that regulates the release of corticotropin from the pituitary gland. The CRF neuropeptide exerts its biological activity by binding to two types of CRF receptors, called CRF₁ and CRF₂. Fear-like behaviors are

produced by intracerebroventricular CRF administration [3]. Research has shown that the over activity in the CRF-CRF₁ signaling system contributes to the beginning of depression and anxiety disorders. This fact has increased the clinical interest in CRH receptor antagonists that can cross the blood-brain barrier for the treatment of depression and anxiety. Several families of molecules targeting CRF₁ receptors have been synthesized and tested [4-9], and some theoretical studies were carried out [10-12].

Recently, the human CRF₁ receptor-binding activities of some benzazole derivatives were reported [8]. Considering that a better knowledge of the drug-receptor interaction will

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help in the design of most potent drugs, we present in this paper the results of a quantum-chemical study of the relationships between electronic structure and CRF₁ receptor inhibition by a set of the above mentioned benzazole derivatives.

2 Experimental

2.1 Methods, Models and Calculations

The selected molecules are a group of benzazole derivatives and were selected from a recent study[8]. Their general structure and biological activity are displayed, respectively, in Fig. 1 and Table 1. The activity selected for this study is the inhibitory activity against ovine ¹²⁵I-CRF binding to human CRF₁ receptors expressed on Chinese hamster ovary cellular membranes [8].

Table 1: Benzazole derivatives and CRF₁ receptor binding inhibition activities.

| S/N | ^a Mol. | R ₁ | R ₂ | R ₃ | R ₄ | R ₅ | R ₆ | R ₇ | R ₈ | Log(IC ₅₀) |
|-----|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 1 | 5 | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | - | 2.30 |
| 2 | 9 | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | - | 1.89 |
| 3 | 13 | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | H | 3.40 |
| 4 | 22a | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | Me | 1.18 |
| 5 | 22b | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | <i>i</i> -Pr | 1.99 |
| 6 | 22c | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | Me | Ph | 3.34 |
| 7 | 29a | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | H | Me | Me | Me | 1.15 |
| 8 | 29b | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | Me | H | Me | 1.18 |
| 9 | 29c | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 1.04 |
| 10 | 29d | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | OMe | Br | Me | 1.92 |
| 11 | 29e | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | H | Me | <i>i</i> -Pr | Cl | Me | 2.15 |
| 12 | 29f | Et | Et | H | H | Me | OMe | Br | Me | 1.15 |
| 13 | 22d | <i>n</i> -Bu | <i>n</i> -Bu | H | H | Me | OMe | Br | Me | 1.08 |
| 14 | 23 | <i>i</i> -Pr | Et | H | H | Me | OMe | Br | Me | 1.34 |
| 15 | 22e | MeOEt | MeOEt | H | H | Me | OMe | Br | Me | 1.11 |
| 16 | 29g | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | Cl | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 0.98 |
| 17 | 29h | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | Cl | Cl | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 2.23 |
| 18 | 29j | <i>n</i> -Pr | <i>n</i> -Pr | H | CN | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 1.15 |
| 19 | 29k | Et | Et | H | Cl | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 1.38 |
| 20 | 29l | Et | Et | H | CN | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 1.14 |
| 21 | 29m | Et | Et | H | Me | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 0.88 |
| 22 | 29o | Et | Et | H | OMe | Me | OMe | Cl | Me | 1.11 |

^aMol. = Molecule

The electronic structure of all molecules was calculated within the Density Functional Theory (DFT) at the B3LYP/6-31g(d,p) level after full geometry optimization[13]. The Gaussian collection of programs was used[14]. All the information needed to calculate numerical values for the local atomic reactivity indices was obtained from the Gaussian results with the D-Cent-QSAR software[15]. All the electron populations smaller than or equal to 0.01 e were considered as zero[16].

Negative electron populations coming from Mulliken Population Analysis were corrected as usual[16]. Since the resolution of the system of linear equations is not possible because we have not enough molecules, we employed Linear Multiple Regression Analysis (LMRA) techniques to find the best solution. A matrix containing the dependent variable (log(IC50) value of each case) and the local atomic reactivity indices of all atoms of the common skeleton as independent variables was built[17]. The Statistica software was used for LMRA[18].

We worked with the *common skeleton hypothesis* defined as a definite collection of atoms, common to all molecules

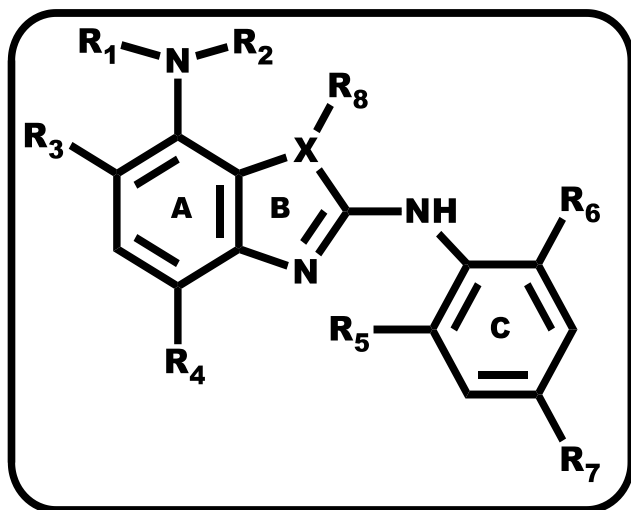


Fig. 1: General structure of the benzazole derivatives.

analyzed. The action of the substituents consists in modifying the electronic structure of the common skeleton and influencing the right alignment of the drug throughout the orientational parameters. It is hypothesized that different parts of this common skeleton accounts for almost all the interactions leading to the expression of a given biological activity. The common skeleton is shown in Fig. 2.

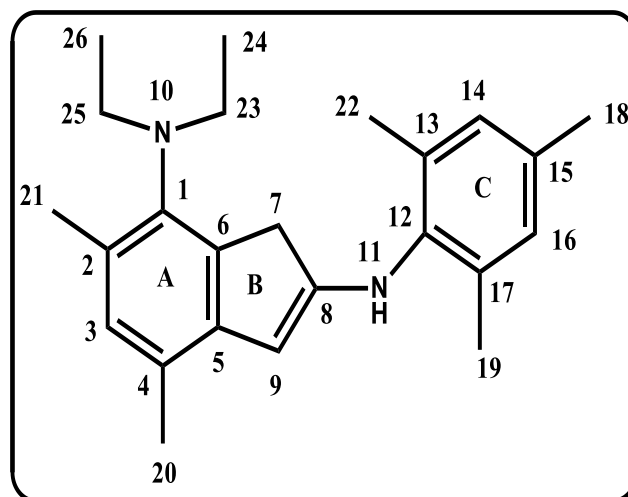


Fig. 2: Common skeleton numbering of the molecules.

The KPG (Klopman-Peradejordi-Gómez) method was employed for obtaining the formal structure-activity relationship. Considering that this method has been extensively explained in earlier papers, we refer the reader to that literature [17], [19-23]. KPG method has shown its potency and explanatory characteristics in a large number of different families of molecules and many biological activities [24-34].

3 Results

The best equation obtained is:

$$\log(IC_{50}) = 1.72 - 8.84F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^* + 0.61S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^* + 3.70F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^* - 2.36F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^* - 1.23S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^* \quad (1)$$

With $n=21$, $R=0.97$, $R^2=0.94$, $\text{adj-}R^2=0.92$, $F(5,15)=47.25$ ($p<0.000001$) and $SD=0.21$. No outliers were detected and no residuals fall outside the $\pm 2\sigma$ limits. Here, $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$ is the electron population (or Fukui index) of the lowest empty MO localized on atom 19, $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$ is the nucleophilic superdelocalizability of the lowest empty MO localized on atom 22, $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$ is the electron population of the lowest empty MO localized on atom 20, $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$ is the electron population of the second lowest empty MO localized on atom 9 and $S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^*$ is the electrophilic superdelocalizability of the third highest occupied MO localized on atom 6. Table 2 and 3 show the beta coefficients, the results of the t-test for significance of coefficients and the matrix of squared correlation coefficients for the variables of Eq. 1. There are no significant internal correlations between independent

variables (Table 3). Figure 3 displays the plot of observed vs. predicted

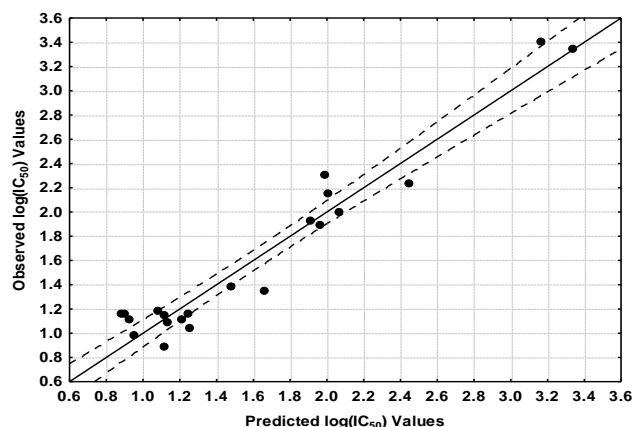


Fig. 3: Plot of predicted vs. observed $\log(\text{IC}_{50})$ values (Eq. 1). Dashed lines denote the 95% confidence interval. Calculated $\log(\text{IC}_{50})$ values.

3.1 Local Molecular Orbitals

Tables 4 and 5 shows the local MO structure of atoms 6, 9, 19, 20 and 22 (see Fig. 2). Nomenclature: Molecule (HOMO) / (HOMO-2)* (HOMO-1)* (HOMO)* - (LUMO)* (LUMO+1)* (LUMO+2)*.

3.2 Discussion

A very important point to stress is the following. When a local atomic reactivity index of an inner occupied MO (i.e., HOMO-1 and/or HOMO-2) or of a higher vacant MO (LUMO+1 and/or LUMO+2) appears in any equation, this means that the remaining of the upper occupied MOs (for example, if HOMO-2 appears, upper means HOMO-1 and HOMO) or the remaining of the empty MOs (for example, if LUMO+1 appears, lower means the LUMO) contribute to the interaction[17]. Table 2 shows that the importance of

Table 2: Beta coefficients and t-test for significance of coefficients in Equation 1

| MO Descriptor | Beta | t(15) | p-level |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | -0.39 | -5.04 | 0.0001 |
| $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$ | 0.76 | 8.73 | 0.000000 |
| $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | 0.24 | 3.55 | 0.003 |
| $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$ | -0.30 | -4.07 | 0.001 |
| $S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^*$ | -0.26 | -3.45 | 0.004 |

Table 3: Matrix of squared correlation coefficients for the variables in Eq. 1.

| MO Descriptor | $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$ | $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$ |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | 1.00 | | | |
| $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$ | 0.21 | 1.00 | | |
| $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$ | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.00 | |
| $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$ | 0.04 | 0.09 | 0.01 | 1.00 |
| $S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^*$ | 0.04 | 0.17 | 0.12 | 0.00 |

Table 4: Local Molecular Orbitals of atoms 6, 9 and 19.

| Mol. | Atom 6 | Atom 9 | Atom 19 |
|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1(95) | 93π94π95π- 98π99π100π | 91π94π95π- 96π98π99π | 85σ87σ92σ- 96π109π110π |
| 2(99) | 97π98π99π- 100σ102σ103π | 97π98π99π- 100σ102π103π | 93σ96σ97σ- 117σ121σ123σ |
| 3(95) | 93π94σ95π- 98π99π100π | 93π94π95π- 96π98π99π | 82σ84σ91σ- 103σ106π107π |
| 4(99) | 97σ98π99σ- 102π103π104π | 97π98π99π- 100π102π103π | 89σ90σ95σ- 101σ108σ112π |
| 5(107) | 105π106π107π- 110π111π112σ | 103π106π107π- 108π112π113π | 96σ99σ104σ- 108π109σ113π |
| 6(115) | 111π114π115σ- 116σ117σ120π | 113π114π115π- 116π117π118π | 107σ111σ112σ- 132σ133σ134π |
| 7(99) | 97σ98π99π- 102π103π104σ | 97π98π99π- 100π102π103π | 89σ90σ95σ- 101σ108σ112π |
| 8(95) | 93σ94σ95σ- 98π99π100σ | 93π94π95π- 96π98π99π | 85σ86σ91σ- 97σ104σ109σ |
| 9(107) | 104σ105π106π- 110π111π112π | 105π106π107π- 108π110π112π | 104π105π106π- 109π111σ125π |
| 10(116) | 114π115π116π- 119π121π122π | 113π115π116π- 117π121π123π | 114π115π116π- 118π119π120σ |
| 11(111) | 109σ110π111π- 114π115π116π | 106σ109π111π- 112π114π117π | 103σ104σ107σ- 113σ126σ131σ |
| 12(108) | 106π107π108σ- 112π113π114σ | 106π107π108π- 109π112π113π | 105π106π107π- 110π111σ118σ |
| 13(124) | 122σ123σ124π- 126π127π129π | 122π123σ124σ- 125π129π131π | 121π122π124π- 126π127π128σ |
| 14(116) | 114π115π116π- 120π121π122σ | 114π115π116π- 117σ120π121π | 113π114π115π- 118π119σ127σ |
| 15(124) | 122π123π124π- 128π129π130σ | 121π123π124π- 125π128π129π | 122π123π124π- 126π127σ136σ |
| 16(115) | 113σ114π115π- 118π119π121σ | 110σ114π115σ- 116π119π121σ | 111π112π115π- 117σ120σ127σ |
| 17(123) | 121σ122σ123π- 125π126π127π | 121σ122π123σ- 124π127π130π | 119π120π123π- 125π126π129σ |
| 18(113) | 111σ112π113π- 114π115π117π | 111π112π113π- 114π115π117π | 110π111π113π- 116π118σ126σ |
| 19(103) | 101π102π103π- 106π107π109σ | 98π99π103π- 104π106π107π | 94π100π101π- 105π162σ169σ |
| 20(105) | 103π104π105σ- 106π107π109π | 102π104π105π- 106π111π113π | 101π103π104π- 108π110σ124π |
| 21(103) | 101π102π103π- 104π106π108π | 100π102π103π- 104π105π106π | 100π101π102π- 105π107σ112σ |
| 22(107) | 105σ106π107π- 110π112π113π | 102σ106π107π- 108π110π112π | 103π104π106π- 109π111σ117σ |

Table 5: Local Molecular Orbitals of atoms 20 and 22.

| Mol. | Atom 20 | Atom 22 |
|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1(95) | 84σ86σ90σ- 102π106π107π | 89π92σ93σ- 104π106π108π |
| 2(99) | 85σ90σ91σ- 104σ109σ114σ | 88σ89σ96σ- 113σ114σ115σ |
| 3(95) | 79σ80σ90σ- 108π109π111π | 84σ88σ91σ- 103σ111π114σ |
| 4(99) | 83σ89σ94σ- 106σ108σ109σ | 90σ92σ95σ- 110σ111σ114σ |
| 5(107) | 89σ90σ100σ- 117π119σ120σ | 96σ99σ104σ- 110σ119σ124σ |
| 6(115) | 96σ98σ110σ- 124π129σ130σ | 103σ105σ111σ- 119σ131σ132σ |
| 7(99) | 83σ89σ94σ- 106σ108σ109σ | 90σ92σ95σ- 110σ111σ114σ |
| 8(95) | 85σ86σ90σ- 102σ105σ106π | 86σ88π91σ- 104σ106σ107σ |
| 9(107) | 93σ97σ102σ- 118σ119σ123σ | 98σ99σ103σ- 108σ111σ119σ |
| 10(116) | 99σ103σ111σ- 124σ125σ126σ | 107σ108σ112σ- 117σ120σ130σ |
| 11(111) | 92σ93σ106σ- 122σ124σ127σ | 102σ103σ107σ- 112σ116σ126σ |
| 12(108) | 92σ96 σ103σ- 117σ118π119σ | 98σ99σ104σ- 109σ111σ120σ |
| 13(124) | 109σ113σ119σ- 133σ136σ137σ | 115σ116σ120- 125σ128σ138σ |
| 14(116) | 99σ102σ111σ- 128σ131σ134σ | 105σ102σ112σ- 117σ119σ127σ |
| 15(124) | 107σ108σ118σ- 136π137σ141σ | 110σ113σ120σ- 125σ127σ138σ |
| 16(115) | 110σ114π115π- 118π121σ126σ | 105σ106σ111σ- 116σ120σ128σ |
| 17(123) | 121π122π123π- 124π125π128σ | 112σ113σ119σ- 129σ137σ140σ |
| 18(113) | 107π108σ112π- 114π115π119π | 103σ104σ109σ- 115σ118σ128σ |
| 19(103) | 99π102π103π- 106π110σ111σ | 93σ94σ100σ- 104σ108σ115σ |
| 20(105) | 99π100σ102π- 106π107π111π | 95σ96σ101σ- 110σ117σ119σ |
| 21(103) | 97σ98σ103π- 106σ127σ128σ | 90σ93σ94σ- 104σ107σ114σ |
| 22(107) | 102σ105π107π- 110π112π127σ | 98σ99σ103σ- 108σ111σ118σ |

variables in Eq. 1 is $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^* > F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^* > F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^* > S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^* > F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$. A high inhibitory activity is associated with high (positive) values of $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$ and $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$, with small (positive) values of $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$ and $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$; and with small (negative) values of $S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^*$. Now we shall employ the variable-by-variable analysis of Eq. 1 to get an approximate idea of what is the role of the atoms appearing there[23].

Atom 22 is the atom of the substituent directly bonded to atom 13 (R_5 , Fig. 2). Table 1 shows that this substituent is apolar (hydrophobic) volume exists in the receptor site, constituted by methanediyl groups from some amino acids. Atom 19 is the atom of the substituent directly bonded to H or Me only. Table 5 shows that all MOs have a σ character. A high inhibitory activity is associated with small (positive) values of $S_{22}^N(\text{LUMO})^*$. Small values are obtained by shifting upwards the LUMO_{22}^* energy, making this MO less reactive. Note that LUMO_{22}^* and HOMO_{22}^* are energetically far from the molecule's frontier MOs. Therefore we may preclude a direct charge transfer. With these considerations we suggest that atom 22 is probably engaged in a weak filled-MO/empty-MO interaction with a site having empty σ MOs available. This implies that an atom 17 (R_6 , Fig. 2). Table 4 shows that all MOs have a σ character and that LUMO_{19}^* and HOMO_{19}^* are energetically far from the molecule's frontier MOs. Therefore, direct charge transfer is excluded. A high inhibitory activity is associated with high (positive) values of $F_{19}(\text{LUMO})^*$, suggesting immediately that atom 19 is interacting weakly with a filled σ MO of the receptor.

Atom 9 is a carbon in ring B (Fig. 2). Table 4 shows that the local frontier molecular orbitals, HOMO_9^* and LUMO_9^* , coincide with the molecular frontier MOs in all cases. All these MOs have a π nature. A high inhibitory

activity is associated with high (positive) values of $F_9(\text{LUMO}+1)^*$. This suggests that atom 9 is interacting with an electron-rich center through at least its two lowest empty local MOs.

Atom 6 is a carbon belonging to rings A and B (Fig. 2). Table 4 shows that the local HOMO, HOMO_6^* , coincides with the molecular HOMO in all but one molecule. The three highest occupied local MOs have different natures, σ or π , following the molecule. Small negative values of $S_6^E(\text{HOMO}-2)^*$ are associated with high activity. This means a low electron-donor capacity of this local MO. On the other hand, atom 6 has a positive net charge in all

molecules. We may interpret these results by suggesting that atom 6 is interacting weakly with an electron-rich center. Given that the lowest empty local MOs of atom 6 do not coincide with the molecular equivalents and that the nature of them is also σ or π following the molecule, we cannot specify what kind of interaction could be in action.

Atom 20 is the first atom of the substituent linked to atom 4 (Fig. 2 and Table 1). Small values $F_{20}(\text{LUMO})^*$ are associated with high activity. Table 5 shows that $(\text{LUMO})_{20}^*$ has π or σ natures following the molecule, and that the local frontier MOs correspond to inner occupied and highest empty molecular MOs. This allows us to suggest that this atom is engaged in a weak interaction with an electron-rich center of unknown nature. But we may say that this center is able to interact with π and σ electrons. All the suggestions are displayed in the partial 2D pharmacophore of Fig. 4.

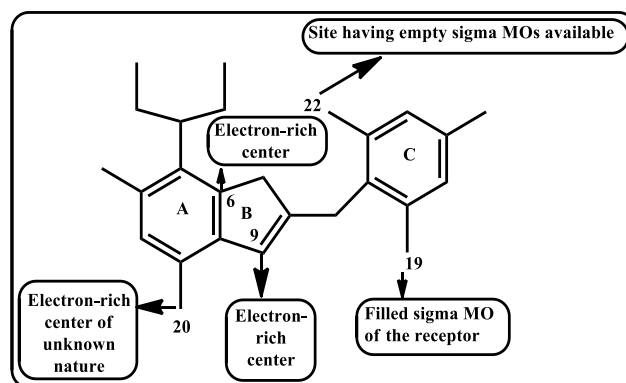


Fig. 4: 2D partial pharmacophore for corticotropin-releasing Factor 1 receptor binding inhibition.

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- [13] Note. The results presented here are obtained from what is now a routinary procedure. For this reason, we built a general model for the paper's structure. This model contains standard phrases for the presentation of the methods, calculations and results because they do not need to be rewritten repeatedly and the number of possible variations to use is finite. In 2017.
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