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## **Identification Of Akn-032, A Novel 2-Aminopyrazine Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitor, With Significant Preclinical Activity In Acute Myeloid Leukemia**

Anna Eriksson, Martin Höglund, Elin Lindhagen, Anna Åleskog, Sadia Bashir Hassan, Carina Ekholm, Karin Fhølenhag, Annika Jenmalm Jensen, Agneta Löthgren, Martin Scobie, et al.

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4 **IDENTIFICATION OF AKN-032, A NOVEL 2-AMINOPYRAZINE TYROSINE KINASE**  
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6 **INHIBITOR, WITH SIGNIFICANT PRECLINICAL ACTIVITY IN ACUTE MYELOID**  
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8 **LEUKEMIA**  
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## Abstract

Aberrant signal transduction by mutant or overexpressed protein kinases has emerged as a promising target for treatment of acute myeloid leukemia (AML). We here present a novel low molecular weight kinase inhibitor, AKN-032, targeting the FMS-like tyrosine kinase 3 (FLT3) and discovered in a new type of screening funnel combining the target therapy approach with sequential cellular screens. AKN-032 was identified among 150 selected hits from three different high throughput kinase screens. Further characterization showed inhibitory activity on FLT3 enzyme with an  $IC_{50}$  of 70 nM. Western blot analysis revealed reduced autophosphorylation of the FLT3 receptor in AML cell line MV4-11 cells after exposure to AKN-032. Flow cytometry disclosed cytotoxic activity against MV4-11, but not against non-malignant 3T3-L1 fibroblast cells. Using a fluorometric microculture cytotoxicity assay, AKN-032 was tested against 15 cell lines and displayed a potent cytotoxic activity in AML cell lines MV4-11 ( $IC_{50} = 0.4 \mu\text{M}$ ) and Kasumi-1 ( $IC_{50} = 2.3 \mu\text{M}$ ). AKN-032 was also highly cytotoxic in tumor cells from AML patients *in vitro*. Furthermore, AKN-032 demonstrated significant antileukemic effect in a relatively resistant *in vivo* hollow fiber mouse model. No major toxicity was observed in the animals. In conclusion, AKN-032 is a promising new kinase inhibitor with significant *in vivo* and *in vitro* activity in AML. Results from the hollow fiber mouse assay suggest a favorable toxicity profile. Future studies will focus on pharmacokinetic properties, toxicity as well as further clarifying the mechanisms of action of AKN-032 in AML.

**Key words:** acute myeloid leukemia; new drug development; tyrosine kinase inhibitor; FLT3

## 1. Introduction

Target based drug discovery has been widely used in the development of new therapies. The idea is to find potent and selective compounds, thus avoiding unwanted off-target effects [1]. The approach has been successful in developing new drugs for cancer treatment, with imatinib mesylate against chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) being one of the most notable examples [2]. The success of this compound as antileukemic treatment is based on the inhibition of Bcr/Abl, a mutated tyrosine kinase that is expressed in the CML tumor cells and upon which the CML cell proliferation depends [3]. Although targeted cancer therapy is an appealing approach, the clinical progress has been uneven and sometimes limited to a subset of patients. This has for instance been due to differences in the mutational status of oncogenes among patients or the acquisition of drug resistance [4]. Thus, an optimal kinase inhibitor may be one that combines targeted inhibition with an effect on other kinases involved in proliferation and/or apoptosis [4, 5].

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is a heterogeneous group of diseases distinguished by uncontrolled proliferation and maturation arrest of early clonal myeloid cells in the bone marrow, leading to decreased production of normal hematopoietic cells. Despite intense chemotherapy, sometimes including allogenic stem cell transplantation, the majority of patients ultimately succumb to their disease [6]. There is an unmet need for new therapies to improve the outcome for AML patients. Thus, several new and more specific targeted antileukemic agents have been developed and are presently undergoing evaluation in clinical trials [7] [8].

The FMS-like tyrosine kinase 3 (FLT3) is a receptor tyrosine kinase (RTK) expressed on early hematopoietic progenitor cells, expression normally being lost upon differentiation. FLT3 is also present at high levels on tumor cells in the majority of acute leukemias [9]. Upon interaction with

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4 its ligand, the FLT3 tyrosine kinase domain is activated, causing enhancement of cell  
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6 proliferation and reduction of apoptosis. Activation of FLT3 affects downstream targets in the  
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8 AKT pathway, STAT and MAPkinases [10]. About 20-30 % of all AML patients display  
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10 activating mutations in FLT3, resulting in constitutive activation of the receptor in absence of the  
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12 ligand. Some of the FLT3 mutations are associated with increased relapse rate and reduced  
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14 overall survival [11, 12]. Several FLT3 inhibitors have been developed, some are presently being  
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16 studied in clinical trials in AML [10]. However, used as single agents, the clinical response of  
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18 hitherto tested putative FLT3-inhibitors has in general been limited [13, 14], although recently  
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20 published case reports suggest that occasional patients may be good responders [15].  
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29 In this study, we have used a screening funnel, combining a target based approach with sequential  
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31 cellular screens, in order to find the optimal compound showing efficacy in both FLT3 wild type  
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33 and FLT3 mutated AML, without targeting unrelated cells. With this approach, we identified  
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35 AKN-032: a promising new antileukemic agent meeting these criteria and suitable for further  
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37 development.  
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## 43 **2. Materials and Methods**

### 44 **2.1 Compounds**

45  
46 Three different high throughput kinase inhibition screens of the Biovitrum's Compound library,  
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48 directed against serine and threonine kinases, resulted in the identification of several chemical  
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50 scaffolds with FLT3 inhibitory activity as an off-target effect. A subset of 150 molecules from  
51  
52 the compound library was then selected as starting points in order to analyze FLT3 inhibitory  
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54 activity. The compounds were designed to bind to the ATP-binding pocket. In the current study,  
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56 we present one of these compounds, AKN-032 (for molecular structure, see fig 1a). For  
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4 comparison we used the multi-targeted kinase inhibitor sunitinib [16] and AB200434 which  
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6 displays a more FLT3 selective profile, mainly targeting FLT3, C-KIT and PDGF-R [17], (both  
7  
8 provided by Biovitrum Compound Collection, Stockholm, Sweden. For molecular structures see  
9  
10 fig 1 b-c). The compounds were stored at -20 or -70°C dissolved as a 10 mM stock in DMSO and  
11  
12 diluted with PBS or culture medium (Sigma-Aldrich Co, Stockholm, Sweden) as needed. For  
13  
14 further comparison regarding cytotoxic activity, the conventional AML drug cytarabine  
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16 (Apoteket AB, Sweden) was used.  
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## 23 **2.2 FLT3 enzyme assay**

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26 An enzyme inhibition assay for the tyrosine kinase domain of FLT3 was established using a  
27  
28 fluorescence polarization technique, Immobilized Metal Ion Affinity-Based Fluorescence  
29  
30 Polarization (IMAP) from Molecular Devices (CA, USA). Kinase activity was measured by  
31  
32 incubation of a fluorescent peptide substrate with the kinase domain (IMAP FP Explorer  
33  
34 Progressive Binding System, Molecular Devices, #R8124, prepared according to the  
35  
36 manufacturer's instructions). Recombinant human FLT3 enzyme was purchased from Upstate  
37  
38 Cell Signalling Solutions (CA, USA) (flt-3 catalogue #14-500) and the fluorescently labeled (5-  
39  
40 FAM (5-Carboxyfluorescein)) substrate peptide with peptide-sequence 5FAM-  
41  
42 KKKKEEIYFFFG-NH<sub>2</sub> was obtained from Molecular Devices. (#R7269). Final concentrations  
43  
44 were 0.0125 U/ml for FLT3 enzyme, 100 nM for FAM-CSKtide and 100 μM for ATP.  
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48 Compounds were tested in dose-response fashion, using an eleven-point dilution range with 1:3  
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50 dilution steps, concentration ranging from 5000 – 0.085 nM or from 500 – 0.008 nM. Assay  
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52 incubation time was 2 hours. Fluorescence was measured using a plate reader (Analyst AD,  
53  
54 Molecular Devices) with excitation wavelength 485 nm and emission wavelength 530 nm,  
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60 integration time of 0.1 seconds.  
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### 2.3 Kinase inhibition panel screen and broad panel safety assessment

A 10 mM stock solution of AKN-032 was sent to Upstate Laboratories (NY, USA) for evaluation of kinase inhibitory activity over a panel of 31 kinases at 10  $\mu$ M using homogeneous time resolved fluorescence assays (HTRF®)[18] according to Upstate standards. AKN-032 was also tested against a MDS Pharma broad selectivity safety assessment panel consisting of 71 different radioligand binding assays for receptors, ion channels and transporters (MDS Pharma Services, Taipei, Taiwan) at 1 and 10  $\mu$ M according to MDS Pharma standards.

### 2.4 AKT and ERK protein kinase assay

A radiometric protein kinase assay, using FlashPlates™ from Perkin Elmer (Boston, MA, USA) in a 50  $\mu$ l reaction volume according the protocol of ProQinase, (33PanQinase® Activity Assay, ProQinase GmbH, Freiburg, Germany) was used for measuring the kinase activity of AKT1,2,3 and ERK1,2. Grade of inhibition of kinase activity (%) was determined after 60 minutes incubation with 10 and 1  $\mu$ M of AKN-032. Staurosporine (kindly supplied by ProQinase) was used as a reference compound.

### 2.5 Cell culture

AKN-032 was tested against a panel consisting of 15 different cell lines. The panel included the myeloma cell line RPMI 8226/S and its sublines 8226/Dox40 and 8226/LR5 (kind gifts from WS Dalton, Department of Medicine, Arizona Cancer Center, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA), the lymphoma cell line U-937 GTB and subline U-937-vcr [19] (kind gifts from professor K. Nilsson, Rudbeck Laboratory, Uppsala, Sweden), the acute lymphocytic leukemia cell line

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4 CCFR-CEM and subline CEM/VM-1 (kind gifts from WT Beck, Department of Pharmacology,  
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6 College of Medicine, University of Tennessee, Memphis, TN, USA), human retinal pigment  
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8 epithelial cell line hTERT-RPE1 (Cloneteck Laboratories, Palo Alto, CA, USA), the small-cell  
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10 lung carcinoma cell line NCI-H69 and its subline H69AR, the renal adenocarcinoma cell line  
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12 ACHN, the cervix adenocarcinoma cell line HeLa, and 3 AML cell lines: MV4-11 (expressing a  
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14 naturally occurring 30 bp FLT3/ITD mutation in homozygous form) [20, 21], Kasumi-1  
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16 (harboring a t(8:21) mutation) [22] and HL-60 (reported to be FLT3 negative and with ability to  
17  
18 differentiate spontaneously) [23-25] (all obtained from American Type Culture collection;  
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20 ATCC, Rockville, MD, USA). A table summarizing the origin and special features of the cell  
21  
22 lines is available as supplemental material. All cell lines except HeLa, hTERT-RPE1, MV4-11  
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24 and HL-60 were grown in culture medium RPMI-1640 supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated  
25  
26 fetal calf serum (FCS), 2mM glutamine, 100µg/ml streptomycin and 100U/ml penicillin at 37°C  
27  
28 in humidified air containing 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. HeLa was grown in Minimum Essential Medium Eagle  
29  
30 with 1mM sodium-pyruvate, hTERT-RPE1 in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium/Nutrient  
31  
32 Mixture F-12 Ham (1:1) and MV4-11 and HL-60 in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium, all  
33  
34 supplemented as above. All cell culture reagents were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich Co. Mouse  
35  
36 embryonal fibroblasts 3T3-L1 (ATCC) were used between passages 4-12, cells were  
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38 subcultivated twice weekly in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium supplemented with 10%  
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40 FCS.  
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## 53 **2.6 Patient samples**

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55 A total of 13 cell samples obtained from bone marrow or peripheral blood of patients with newly  
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57 diagnosed or relapsed adult AML were used. Tumor cells were isolated by density gradient  
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59 centrifugation, cryopreserved in 10% DMSO and 90% inactivated calf serum by initial freezing  
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4 for 24 h at -70°C, followed by storage at -150°C and then thawed at experimental setup. Cell  
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6 culture medium RPMI 1640 (Sigma-Aldrich Co), supplemented as described above, was used  
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8 throughout. Cell viability was determined by Trypan-blue exclusion test and the proportion of  
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10 tumor cells in each cell preparation assessed by inspection of May-Grünwald-Giemsa stained  
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12 cytocentrifuge preparations [26]. The sampling was approved by the Ethics Committee of  
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14 Uppsala University.  
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21 AML cell samples were examined regarding FLT3 mutation status. For FLT3-internal tandem  
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23 duplications (FLT3-ITD), genomic DNA was analyzed by PCR followed by capillary  
24  
25 electrophoresis on an AB3130XL genetic analyzer using GeneMapper™ software (Life  
26  
27 Technologies, Foster City, CA, USA) for fragment analysis. For FLT3-tyrosine kinase domain  
28  
29 point mutations in codon D835 (FLT3-TKD), genomic DNA was analyzed by PCR as described  
30  
31 previously [12]. Clinical characteristics, FLT3 mutation status and karyotype of the patients are  
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33 summarized in Table1.  
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## 41 **2.7 Western blot**

42 MV4-11 cells were incubated for 15 hours with one of six concentrations of AKN-032. Protein  
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44 was extracted from cells using RIPA buffer supplemented with phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride  
45  
46 (PMSF), sodium orthovanadate and protease inhibitor cocktail (Santa Cruz Biotech, CA, USA).  
47  
48 Protein concentrations were measured by bicinchoninic acid protein assay [27] and 1000 µg  
49  
50 protein from each sample was incubated with anti-FLT3-antibody (#sc-20733, Santa Cruz  
51  
52 Biotech), separated by NuPAGE (Invitrogen Ltd, Paisley, UK #LC5602), transferred to PVDF-  
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54 membranes (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Sundbyberg, Sweden) and probed with primary antibody (p-  
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4 Tyr, #sc7020, Santa Cruz). A secondary antibody (conjugated with horseradish peroxidase  
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6 (HRP)) was used for chemiluminiscense detection (Amersham ECL Plus detection kit, GE  
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8 healthcare, Uppsala, Sweden). The membrane was stripped of antibodies and reprobed using a  
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10 goat antibody against FLT3 (#F0550, Sigma-Aldrich Co) and a HRP-conjugated rabbit anti-goat  
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12 secondary antibody (#P0449, Dako Sweden AB, Stockholm, Sweden).  
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## 19 **2.8 The Fluorometric Microculture Cytotoxicity Assay**

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21 The fluorometric microculture cytotoxicity assay (FMCA), described in detail previously [28], is  
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23 a method based on the measurement of fluorescence generated from hydrolysis of fluorescein  
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25 diacetate (FDA) to fluorescein by cells with intact plasma membranes. FDA (Sigma-Aldrich Co)  
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27 was dissolved in DMSO and kept frozen (-20°C) as a stock solution (10mg/mL) protected from  
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29 light.  
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36 For screening of cytotoxic effect, dose-response plates containing compounds were prepared as  
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38 described previously [29]. In short, the compounds were transferred to 384-well microtitre plates  
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40 in duplicate wells in ten- or fivefold serial dilution, starting from 100, 25 or 10 µM. A 1% DMSO  
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42 control served as vehicle control. The plates were stored at -70°C until further use. Cells were  
43  
44 then seeded into the drug-prepared 384-well plates at varying density per well depending on cell  
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46 type (AML: 25000 cells/well, NCI-H69 and H69AR: 2500 cells/well and all other cell lines:  
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48 5000 cells/well). Plates were incubated at 37°C for 72 h, and cell density measured using the  
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53 FMCA.  
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57 For accurate IC<sub>50</sub> determination, 3000-5000 MV4-11 cells/well were seeded in 50 µl culture  
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59 medium supplemented with 10 or 20% heat-inactivated fetal calf serum into a 96-well plate.  
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4 Threefold serial dilution from a DMSO stock of AKN-032, sunitinib or AB200434 was made in  
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6 serum-free culture medium supplemented with penicillin and streptomycin and then added to the  
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8 cells, 50  $\mu$ l of the serial dilutions were added to the cell-suspension. The final concentration  
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10 ranged from 5  $\mu$ M to 0.8 nM, or from 500 nM to 0.08 nM, all wells containing 0,5% DMSO. A  
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12 0,5% DMSO control served as vehicle control. For comparison, the conventional AML drug  
13  
14 cytarabine (Apoteket AB, Sweden) was serially diluted as described above, final concentrations  
15  
16 ranging from 5  $\mu$ M to 0.8 nM. The cells were incubated for 72 hours at 37°C and the total  
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18 number of viable cells then measured by use of the FMCA.  
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26 For the FMCA, cell survival after exposure to cytotoxic drugs is presented as survival index (SI,  
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28 %) defined as fluorescence in test wells in percent of control cultures (cells in culture medium),  
29  
30 blank values subtracted. FMCA was considered successful only when fluorescence signal in  
31  
32 control cultures was  $>5x$  of mean blank values, a mean coefficient of variation in control cultures  
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34 was  $< 30\%$  and tumor cell fraction surpassed 70% after incubation.  
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## 41 **2.9 Flow cytometry analysis**

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43 The effect of compounds on viability and proliferation was also analyzed using flow cytometry.  
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45 MV4-11 or 3T3-L1 cells were seeded, treated with compounds in serial dilution and incubated as  
46  
47 described for the accurate  $IC_{50}$  determination. After 72 hours, 100  $\mu$ l viability reagent (Guava  
48  
49 ViaCount, staining dead cells) diluted in PBS according to manufacturer's instruction, was added  
50  
51 to each well in the drug-prepared 96-well plates, resulting in a total volume of 200  $\mu$ l. The 3T3-  
52  
53 L1 cells were trypsinised and resuspended in 100  $\mu$ l serum free medium prior to addition of  
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55 viability reagent. Number of viable cells was determined using Guava 96-well ViaCount assay  
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4 (Guava Technologies, CA, USA) according to manufacturer's instructions. Survival (%) was  
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6 calculated as number of viable cells per ml compared to vehicle treated cells (0,5% DMSO) at the  
7  
8 end of experiment.  
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## 10 11 12 13 14 **2.10 Apoptosis assay**

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16 A high content screening assay for measurement of apoptosis was used to examine death  
17  
18 characteristics of cells exposed to AKN-032, the method has been described in detail previously  
19  
20 [30, 31]. Briefly, 12 000 cells/well of AML cell lines MV4-11 and HL-60 were plated in flat-  
21  
22 bottom 96-well plates and exposed for 24 hours to 4 concentrations of AKN-032 in duplicate  
23  
24 wells in tenfold serial dilution starting from 50  $\mu$ M. A known apoptosis-inducing agent,  
25  
26 etoposide (Apoteket AB), was used as a positive control at a concentration of 1 or 10  $\mu$ M. The  
27  
28 FLICA probe FAM-DEVD-FMK (part of the CaspaTag apoptosis kit, Millipore, Solna, Sweden),  
29  
30 which stains cells with activated caspases, was added one hour before the end of drug exposure at  
31  
32 a final concentration of 20  $\mu$ M. Plates were washed in PBS, followed by fixation with 3.7%  
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34 formaldehyde and 10  $\mu$ M Hoechst 33342 (Sigma-Aldrich Co) for 15 minutes and then washed  
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36 twice again. Caspase activity was analyzed by use of the ArrayScan<sup>TM</sup> high content screening  
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38 system (Cellomics Inc., Pittsburgh, PS, USA), described in detail previously [30], at least 800  
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40 cells were analyzed per well.  
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## 51 **2.11 Pharmacokinetic studies**

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53 A solution of 3 mg/ml AKN-032, 10% hydroxypropyl-beta-cyclodextrin, 20 mM sodium acetate  
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55 and 0.9 % sodium chloride was administered subcutaneously at a dose of 15 mg/kg to nine male  
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57 C57 black mice (Scanbur, Sollentuna Sweden). Blood samples were collected at 0.08, 0.25, 0.5,  
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4 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 and 24 hours following injection (n=3 per time point, each mouse was sampled  
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6 thrice) and plasma was prepared by centrifugation (~4000 rpm, 5 min). Plasma concentrations of  
7  
8 AKN-032 were determined by protein precipitation and electrospray LCMS. Lower limit of  
9  
10 quantification (LLOQ) was 0.003  $\mu$ M. Pharmacokinetic parameters were calculated based on  
11  
12 median plasma concentration versus time data using WinNonlin® software version 4.1 (Pharsight  
13  
14 Corp., USA). The area under the plasma concentration versus time curve (AUC) was calculated  
15  
16 by the linear trapezoidal method and the plasma half-life ( $t_{1/2}$ ) was estimated from the slope of the  
17  
18 curve between 0.25 and 4 hours. Animals were given food and water ad libitum throughout the  
19  
20 experiment. The animals were euthanized by terminal bleeding from vena cava, under sedation  
21  
22 with isoflurane. The study was approved by the Animal Ethics Committee in Northern Stockholm  
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24 (no N94/04).  
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### 33 **2.12 Hollow fiber**

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35 Cells from two AML patients (see table 1) and from the AML cell line MV4-11 were cultured  
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37 inside semi-permeable polyvinylidene fluoride fibers [32]. The fibers were sealed and incubated  
38  
39 for two days before implantation subcutaneously into NMRI male mice (Scanbur). The day  
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41 following implantation, subcutaneous twice daily administration of either 20 mg/kg or 40 mg/kg  
42  
43 of AKN-032, or vehicle only (n=8 animals/group) was started. Body weight was determined  
44  
45 daily in connection with the first drug administration. Drug administration lasted for six days,  
46  
47 whereupon the fibers were retrieved and cell density evaluated using the MTT (3-[4,5-  
48  
49 dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide)-assay [33]. This method is based on the  
50  
51 conversion of MTT to blue formazan crystals by living cells. The formazan was extracted by  
52  
53 DMSO as previously described [34], and optical density (OD) read at 570 nm. Cell density for  
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4 each fiber on retrieval day was expressed as net growth, defined as  $(OD_{\text{retrieval day}} - OD_{\text{implantation}}$   
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6  $\text{day}) / OD_{\text{implantation day}}$ , i.e. the percent change in cell density in the fibers during the trial.  
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11 The animals were observed regarding behavior and weight gain throughout the experiment. After  
12  
13 six days of drug administration, 200  $\mu\text{l}$  blood samples were obtained through the orbital plexus  
14  
15 after anaesthetization with isofluran just before euthanasia by cervical dislocation. The blood  
16  
17 samples were analyzed for hematological parameters using Micros 60 (ABX Diagnostics,  
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19 Montpellier, France). Animals were caged four in each cage and fed a commercial diet  
20  
21 (Lactamin AB, Sweden), water was given ad libitum. The study was approved by the Animal  
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23 Ethics Committee in Uppsala (no C243/6).  
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### 30 31 **2.13 Statistical analysis**

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33 The  $IC_{50}$  values for FLT3 enzyme as well as for MV4-11 and 3T3L1 as measured by the flow  
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35 cytometry analysis were determined using the equation  $(A + ((B - A) / (1 + ((C/x)^D))))$  where A  
36  
37 equals min, B equals max, C equals  $IC_{50}$ , D equals Hill slope and x equals compound  
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39 concentration[35].  $IC_{fix50}$  equals the concentration of compound resulting in 50 % inhibition, in  
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41 contrast to the  $IC_{50}$ -value described by the equation, corresponding to the the inflection point of  
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43 the dose-response curve.  
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50 For the FMCA, the cytotoxic  $IC_{50}$  was determined from log concentration-effect curves in Graph  
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52 Pad Prism (GraphPad software Inc., CA, USA) using non-linear regression analysis.  
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54 For comparison between groups in the in vivo hollow fiber studies, Student's t-test was used,  
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56  $p < 0.05$  was considered significant.  
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### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 AKN-032 is inhibitory to the FLT3 enzyme**

AKN-032 was originally identified as a hit in one of three different high throughput kinase inhibition screens of approximately 100 000 compounds from the Biovitrum compound library, performed at Biovitrum AB. The three screens identified chemical scaffolds with FLT3-inhibitory potential and approximately 150 compounds were selected for further analysis and verification of the FLT3 inhibitory activity. A subset of these hits, including AKN-032, was further characterized in a panel screen of 31 kinases at 10  $\mu$ M. Inhibitory activity for AKN-032 was most pronounced against FLT3 kinase (data not shown). Screening data from other kinases tested (ex. PDGF-R, CK1delta, TRK A/B) indicated IC<sub>50</sub> values low  $\mu$ M range (data not shown).

The 150 compounds identified as potentially inhibitory to FLT3 were tested in a dose-response enzyme inhibition assay. The IC<sub>50</sub> value of AKN-032 on the FLT3 enzyme was determined to be 70 nM (fig 2a). Sunitinib was used as a positive control, typically showing an IC<sub>50</sub> value of 0.5 nM (fig 2b), which is in accordance with data reported in the literature [36]. In addition, western blot analysis showed that AKN-032 reduces autophosphorylation of the FLT3-receptor in MV4-11 cells (fig 2c).

To evaluate the effect of AKN-032 on some of the targets downstream to FLT3; the compound was also evaluated in AKT and ERK protein kinase assay. No direct inhibition of AKT 1,2,3 or ERK 1,2 was seen at the test concentrations 1 and 10  $\mu$ M (fig 2 d).

#### **3.2 AKN-032 is highly cytotoxic to the AML cell line MV4-11 but not to normal fibroblast 3T3-L1 cells in vitro**

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4 All compounds with an  $IC_{50}$  of 300 nM and lower in the FLT3 enzyme inhibition assay were  
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6 tested in a Guava cell kill assay against the FLT3 mutated AML cell line MV4-11. To find  
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8 compounds with a preferred cell kill profile, agents displaying activity in the MV4-11 assay were  
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10 studied in counter-screen using rapidly growing normal fibroblast 3T3-L1 cells. Sunitinib and  
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12 AB200434, a compound with a  $IC_{50}$  of 0.5 nM on the FLT3 enzyme [17], were used as reference  
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14 compounds. Sunitinib showed cytotoxic effect on both MV4-11 and 3T3-L1, whereas AB200434  
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16 and in particular AKN-032, displayed a more MV4-11-specific activity (table 2). Compounds  
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18 highly effective against MV4-11 but lacking in toxicity against the fibroblasts were taken forward  
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20 in the screening program and tested against a broader panel of tumor cell lines and primary AML  
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22 samples.  
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### 31 **3.3 AKN-032 shows selective cytotoxic activity against AML cell lines MV4-11 and** 32 33 **Kasumi-1**

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35 Of the 15 cell lines tested in the FMCA, MV4-11 was by far the most sensitive to AKN-032 with  
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37 an  $IC_{50}$  value of 0.4  $\mu$ M (fig 3a), followed by the AML cell line Kasumi-1 ( $IC_{50}$  = 2.3  $\mu$ M). The  
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39 corresponding  $IC_{50}$  value for the conventional AML drug cytarabine was 1.7  $\mu$ M in MV4-11 (fig  
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41 3a). In HL-60, full cytotoxic response with no surviving cells was achieved, but at considerably  
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43 higher concentrations than for the other two AML cell lines. In the other cell lines tested,  
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45 including parental cell lines and drug resistant sublines, AKN-032 displayed cytotoxic activity  
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47 only at high concentrations (fig 3b). No difference between the parental cell lines and their  
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49 respective drug-resistant sublines was observed.  
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4 Potential off-target effects were studied in a broad selectivity safety assessment panel consisting  
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6 of 71 different assays for receptors, ion channels and transporters, in which AKN-032 revealed  
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8 no activity (data not shown).  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 **3.4 AKN-032 induces apoptosis in MV4-11 and HL-60 cells**

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16 The flow cytometry analysis showed the presence of dead cells even after exposure to low  
17  
18 concentrations of AKN-032 in MV4-11 cells (fig 3c). To further explore the mechanism of cell  
19  
20 death induced by AKN-032, cells from the AML cell lines MV4-11 and HL-60 were incubated  
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22 for 24 hours with different concentrations of the compound and then analyzed in a high content  
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24 screening assay for measurement of apoptosis. Incubation with AKN-032 caused activation of  
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26 caspase-3/7 accompanied by fragmentation of the nuclei (fig 3d), indicating that the caspase 3-  
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28 pathway is active in the AKN-032-induced apoptosis in AML cell lines.  
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### 36 **3.5 AKN-032 is cytotoxic to primary AML-cells in vitro**

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38 Three of the initial 150 compounds, displaying the preferred cell kill profile described above,  
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40 were tested in the FMCA against primary AML samples. Cells from 11 AML-patients; 6 mutated  
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42 and 5 wild type with respect to FLT3 (table 1) were used, MV4-11 cells were used as positive  
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44 control and sunitinib and AB200434 as reference compounds. All compounds tested were active  
45  
46 in MV4-11, sunitinib and AB200434 being the most potent ones, but not all agents showed effect  
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48 in patient cells. Primary AML cells were in general more resistant to all FLT3-inhibitors tested  
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50 than MV4-11 and the IC<sub>50</sub> in the cell line did not predict efficacy in patient cells. Notably, the  
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52 discrepancy between the two cell systems varied depending on the compound.  
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4 Out of the compounds tested, AKN-032 was selected for further evaluation due to high cytotoxic  
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6 activity in the primary tumor cells. No difference between FLT3 wild type and mutated cases  
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8 (meanIC<sub>50</sub> values of 8.5 μM and 7.2 μM respectively) was observed. The dose-response curve  
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10 was right-shifted by 1 log unit for the primary tumor samples as compared to MV4-11 (fig 4a).  
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12 The incongruity between cell systems for some of the other compounds, here exemplified by  
13  
14 sunitinib, was much more pronounced in the order of 3 log units (fig 4b). In addition, for some  
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16 compounds, here exemplified by AB200434, efficacy in MV4-11 cells did not translate to  
17  
18 efficacy in primary AML cells (fig 4c). This was also the case for the two other FLT3-inhibitors  
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20 from the Biovitrum compound library, displaying IC<sub>50</sub>s of 52 nM and 62 nM on the MV4-11  
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22 cells but lacking efficacy in the primary AML samples (data not shown).  
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### 31 **3.6 AKN-032 inhibits growth of MV4-11 cells and primary AML cells in vivo**

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33 To study the pharmacokinetic and cytotoxic properties of AKN-032 in vivo, C57 black mice  
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35 were given 15 mg/kg of AKN-032 subcutaneously. The AUC was 13μM·h, maximum plasma  
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37 concentration (C<sub>max</sub>), was 18 μM (0.25 h after dose) and t<sub>1/2</sub> was estimated to 0.44 h. In the  
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39 hollow-fiber study in NMRI mice, 6-8 fibers were available for evaluation of effect in each  
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41 dosing regimen. The low dose (20 mg/kg) significantly inhibited net growth in MV4-11. At the  
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43 higher dose (40 mg/kg), not only an inhibition of net growth, but a clear reduction of the  
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45 leukemic mass was observed for the MV4-11 cell line (fig 5a). In the first AML sample, the total  
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47 cell growth was very modest and no significant inhibition was observed. In the second AML  
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49 sample, net growth was significantly inhibited in response to the higher dose of AKN-032 (fig  
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51 5a). The mice in the higher dose group of AKN-032 showed decreased food intake and reduced  
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53 weight gain (p=0.05 vs. vehicle), whereas no difference in weight gain was observed in the low  
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4 dose group (fig 5b). As shown by blood counts analyzed on the day of fiber retrieval, no major  
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6 hematological toxicity was observed in the animals (fig 5c). No organ effects were seen upon  
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8 macroscopical inspection post mortem.  
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#### 10 11 12 13 14 **4. Discussion**

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16 As a RTK only expressed in the hematopoetic system, with mutations and overexpression linked  
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18 to disease, in particular AML, FLT3 is a valid target for drug discovery [37]. Therefore, several  
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20 attempts have been made to find FLT3 inhibitors of use in the clinical setting. Focus has been on  
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22 optimizing potent enzyme inhibitors with good pharmacological properties. However, clinical  
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24 effects have so far been limited. As for very potent but multitarget kinase inhibitors like sunitinib  
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26 or lestaurtinib, the dose required to achieve cytotoxic response through inhibition of FLT3  
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28 autophosphorylation has in some cases been associated with toxicity, limiting the clinical dose  
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30 [14]. Very selective compounds, on the other hand, may not be effective in the general AML  
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32 patient, but might be useful in targeting a subset of AML-cells, where both proliferation and  
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34 viability is dependant on high FLT3 activity [37].  
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43 In this study, we have identified a new compound, AKN-032, by using a screening funnel  
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45 combining target inhibition with sequential cellular screens and aimed at identifying compounds  
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47 with a preferred cell-kill profile from a subset of kinase inhibitors. In this process, the cut off  
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49 level, both on enzyme inhibition and efficacy in the MV4-11 cell assay was set relatively high.  
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51 About 150 compounds identified as hits in other kinase screens were selected for testing in a  
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53 FLT3 enzyme inhibition assay, compounds with an  $IC_{50}$  below 300 nM in this assay were then  
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55 selected for further characterization. Inhibition of MV4-11 proliferation was chosen as the first  
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57 cellular assay. This cell line has been used extensively when characterizing FLT3 enzyme  
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4 inhibitors both in cell-kill assays and in xenografts [25, 38, 39]. Compounds with an  $IC_{50}$  below  
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6 400 nM in the MV4-11 cell line were then tested in another cellular assay, using the rapidly  
7  
8 proliferating 3T3-L1 fibroblast cell line as a counter-screen. Only compounds showing better  
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10 efficacy on MV4-11 than on 3T3-L1 cells were brought to the next level of screening. The aim of  
11  
12 this counter-screening step was to exclude compounds with a multitarget kinase inhibitory  
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14 profile. Several very potent compounds, here exemplified by the reference compound AB200434,  
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16 but also less potent compounds like AKN-032 displayed the preferred cell kill profile. These  
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18 compounds were then taken to the final level of cellular screening.  
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24 The aim of this project was to find compounds with selective efficacy towards AML cells with  
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26 and without FLT3-mutation. Consequently, AKN-032 and two other FLT3-inhibitors from the  
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28 Biovitrum compound library, as well as the two reference kinase inhibitors sunitinib and  
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30 AB200434, were tested for dose-response on 11 primary patient cells: 6 harboring mutations and  
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32 5 wild type with regards to FLT3 by using the FMCA. MV4-11 was again used as a reference  
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34 cell line.  
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41 Sunitinib showed efficacy on all tumor samples tested, the  $IC_{50}$  being three log units higher on  
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43 patient cells than on the MV4-11 cell line. Surprisingly, the very potent and selective reference  
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45 compound AB200434 did not show efficacy in the primary patient cells. This was also the case  
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47 for the two other FLT3-inhibitors from the Biovitrum compound library with  $IC_{50}$ s of 52 nM and  
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49 62 nM respectively on the MV4-11 cells, but lacking efficacy in primary patient cells.  
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51  
52 Unexpectedly, we found AKN-032, a FLT3-inhibitor with an  $IC_{50}$  of 70 nM in the FLT3 enzyme  
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54 inhibition assay, inhibiting autophosphorylation of FLT3 in MV4-11 cells and with a relatively  
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56 high  $IC_{50}$  in the MV4-11 flow cytometry cell proliferation assay, to be more potent on the  
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4 primary patient cells than for example AB200434. Thus AKN-032 fulfilled the criteria set out in  
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6 our screening funnel, despite not being the most potent compound.  
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11 In a cell line panel representing several different hematological and non-hematological  
12 malignancies, the newly synthesized tyrosine kinase inhibitor AKN-032 showed significant  
13 cytotoxic activity in the AML cell lines MV4-11 and Kasumi-1 as measured by the FMCA. In the  
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15 third AML cell line tested HL-60, a cell line reported to be FLT3 negative [25], a full cytotoxic  
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17 response was achieved, but at noticeably higher concentrations.  
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26 As expected,  $IC_{50}$  for AKN-032 in the FMCA cell kill assay was higher than in our FLT3 kinase  
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28 assay. This may be due to pharmacokinetic factors related to the cellular models used, including  
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30 uptake and efflux of the compound (data not shown). Still, the dose-response curves from the  
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32 MV4-11 experiments followed a sigmoid pattern with an  $IC_{50}$  of 0.4  $\mu$ M, a value lower than the  
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34 results observed for the AML standard drug cytarabine in the same experiment. Exploration of  
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36 death characteristics show that the AKN-032-induced apoptosis in AML cell lines MV4-11 and  
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38 HL-60 at least in part has its origin in the activation of caspase-3/7.  
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46 MV4-11 is an excellent model system for FLT3 mutated AML [40], but as a cell line, it is likely  
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48 to have acquired additional genetic changes in becoming immortalized and adapted for continual  
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50 growth [41]. Although being essential for investigation on mechanism of action of cytotoxic  
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52 drugs and valuable tools in drug discovery, cell lines may have limitations when it comes to  
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54 predicting clinical outcome [42, 43]. Primary patient tumor cells, on the other hand, provide a  
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56 model well suited for preclinical prediction of tumor-specific activity and direction of phase II  
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58 trials to suitable patients [44]. This prompted us to include efficacy on primary patient cells in  
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4 our screening funnel, including both FLT3 mutated and wild type AML samples. Our results  
5 confirmed that AKN-032 has significant in vitro activity in AML. The more prominent effect (i.e.  
6 lower IC<sub>50</sub>) in the cell line assay reflects a high proliferation rate making the cells more sensitive  
7 to cytotoxic drugs in general. The effect of AKN-032 in rapidly growing cell lines like MV4-11  
8 is caused by a combination of absent proliferation and cell death, as shown by the Guava  
9 ViaCount assay as well as the caspase activation assay. In contrast to cell lines, most primary  
10 AML tumor cells are low proliferating in vitro and the efficacy of AKN-032 in these cells may to  
11 a greater extent be caused by cell death.  
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26 In our primary tumor material, we observed no difference in sensitivity to AKN-032 between  
27 FLT3 mutated and wild-type AML cases. There are findings suggesting a role of the wild-type  
28 FLT3-receptor in AML [9], others proposing that a variance in quantitative expression of wild-  
29 type FLT3, regardless of mutation status, might explain different response to AKN-032 as well as  
30 to other putative FLT3-inhibitors [45]. Results from the AKT and ERK protein kinase assay  
31 show no direct inhibition of these kinases. This along with the cytotoxic effect of AKN-032 in  
32 the FLT3 negative AML cell line HL-60 might suggest additional mechanisms of cytotoxic  
33 activity of the compound. Studies investigating a possible correlation between levels of wild-type  
34 FLT3 expression and the response to AKN-032 as well as other mechanisms of action in AML  
35 are underway.  
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53 The hollow fiber assay allows studies of the effect of different substances in vitro as well as in  
54 vivo. Using the hollow fiber method in animal models makes it possible to study  
55 pharmacokinetics, tumor effects and hematological toxicity of anticancer drugs in the same  
56 animal [34]. Thus, we were able to demonstrate an antitumoral effect in this relatively resistant  
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4 model, suggesting a good distribution of AKN-032 to subcutaneous tissue in mice. Importantly,  
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6 no significant toxic effects were observed, however the animals in the higher dose group showed  
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8 a reduction in weight gain. We speculate that this may be related to nausea with decreased food  
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10 intake as a result.  
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14 As for pharmacokinetics, subcutaneous injections of AKN-032 in C57 black mice resulted in a  
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16 short time to peak concentration and relatively short  $t_{1/2}$ . Assuming linear pharmacokinetics and  
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18 no strain differences, one can predict that twice daily injections in NMRI mice in the hollow fiber  
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20 model result in a similar exposure to the compound to that observed in C57 black mice.  
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26 In conclusion, AKN-032 is a new tyrosine kinase inhibitor with significant in vitro cytotoxic  
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28 activity in several different AML cell types, seemingly irrespective of FLT3-mutation status.  
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30 Results from the hollow fiber mouse assay demonstrate in vivo activity and suggest a favorable  
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32 toxicity profile of the drug. Future preclinical studies will focus on pharmacokinetic properties  
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34 and toxicity, as well as further clarifying the mechanisms of action of AKN-032 in AML.  
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51 Selanders Research Foundation.  
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#### 57 **Conflict of interest**

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3  
4 The following authors were employees of Biovitrum AB when these experiments were performed  
5  
6 or when this manuscript was written and revised: C. Ekholm, K. Fhølenhag, A. Jenmalm Jensen,  
7  
8 A. Löthgren, M. Scobie, V. Parrow. V. Parrow is now primary affiliated to and part owner of  
9  
10 Akinion Pharmaceuticals AB. M. Scobie is primary affiliated to Orexo AB and A. Åleskog works  
11  
12 as medical advisor for Merck Sharp and Dome AB. C. Ekholm is a minor stockholder of  
13  
14  
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16 Biovitrum AB.  
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**Table 1**

**Acute myeloid leukemia patients (n=13). Clinical characteristics, FLT3 mutation status and karyotype. FAB indicates French-American-British classification; n.d. - not done; complex karyotype indicates karyotype with three or more aberrations.**

<b>Sample (no)</b>	<b>Age (yrs)</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Subclass (FAB)</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>FLT3 ITD</b>	<b>FLT3 D835</b>	<b>Karyotype</b>
1	53	M	M2	Relapse	wt	wt	Complex
2	38	M	n.d	Relapse after allo SCT	wt	wt	Complex
3	28	F	M2	Relapse	wt	mut	46,XX
4	55	F	M4	Newly diagnosed	wt	wt	46,XX, (45, XX, -9)
5	61	M	M2	Relapse	mut	wt	46,XY
6	22	F	M1	Newly diagnosed	wt	wt	Failed, 46XX after SCT
7	58	M	n.d	Relapse	wt	mut	n.d.
8	53	M	M0	Relapse	wt	wt	Complex
9	68	M	M1	Newly diagnosed	mut	wt	46,XY
10	79	M	M2	Relapse	mut	wt	46,XY
11	58	F	M2	Relapse	mut	wt	46,XX
12*	53	M	M0	Relapse	wt	wt	Complex
13*	47	M	M1	Newly diagnosed	wt	wt	46xy,inv(16)(p13q22)(25)

\* used in the hollow fiber study

Table 2

Inhibitory activity of AKN-032, sunitinib and AB200434 in MV4-11 and 3T3-L1 normal fibroblast cells evaluated by flow cytometry, indicated by IC<sub>50</sub> values ( $\pm$  (SD), n = number of experiment repeats)

<u>Compound</u>	<u>Cell line</u>	<u>IC50 (nM)</u>	<u>SD (nM)</u>	<u>N</u>
AKN-032	MV4-11	307	103	38
	3T3-L1	>5000	NA	11
Sunitinib	MV4-11	1,5	1,2	13
	3T3-L1	2,2	0,7	6
AB240034	MV4-11	1	1,4	14
	3T3-L1	44	23,6	7

Fig 1 a-c

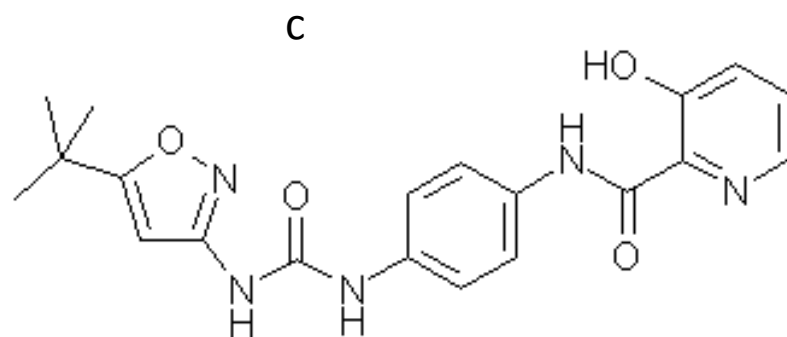
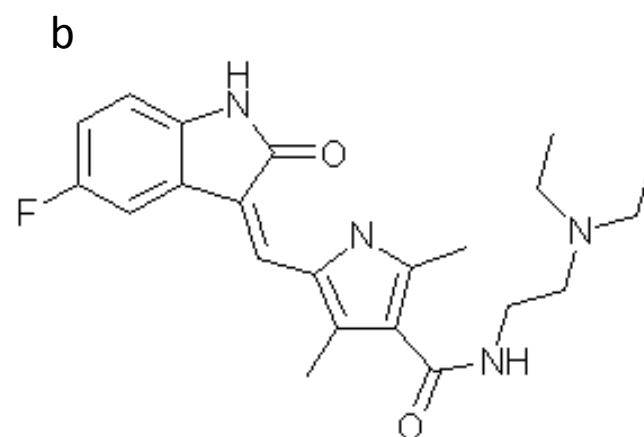
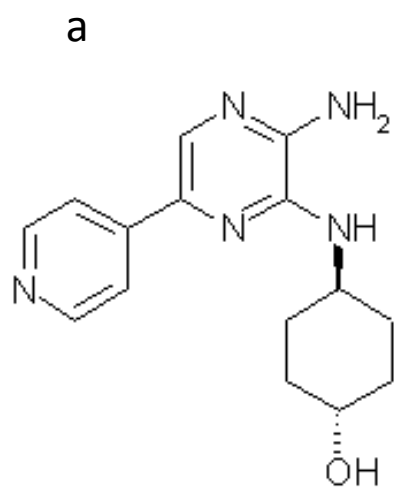
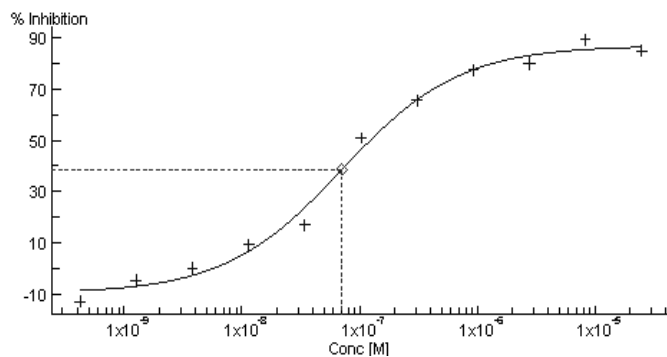


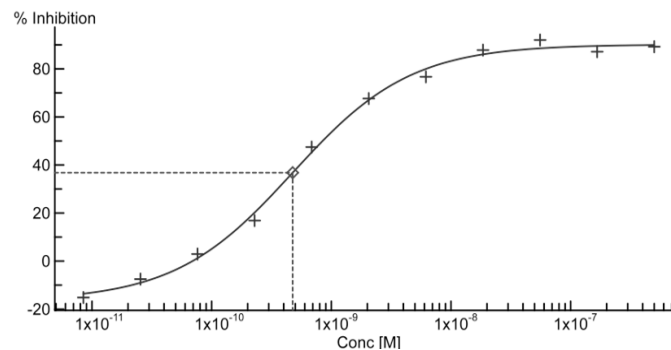
Figure  
Fig 2 a-d

a



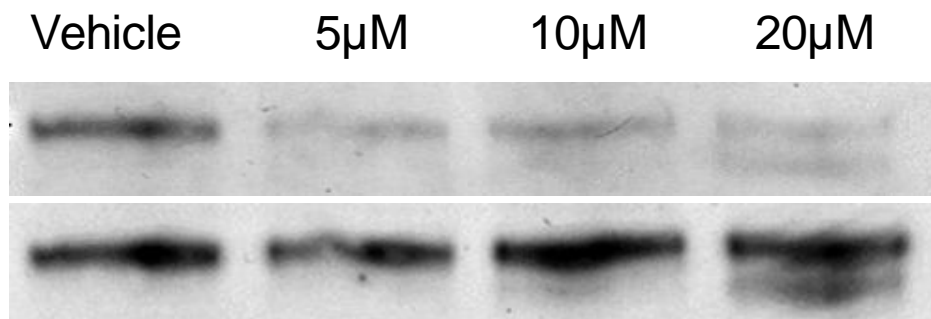
-9,80855	86,99048	7,10E-08	1,23E-07	0,868653	0,991715
Ymin	Ymax	IC50	ICfix50	Hill	r <sup>2</sup>

b



-16,5788	90,15314	4,78E-10	8,46E-10	0,878213	0,996878
Ymin	Ymax	IC50	ICfix50	Hill	r <sup>2</sup>

c



d

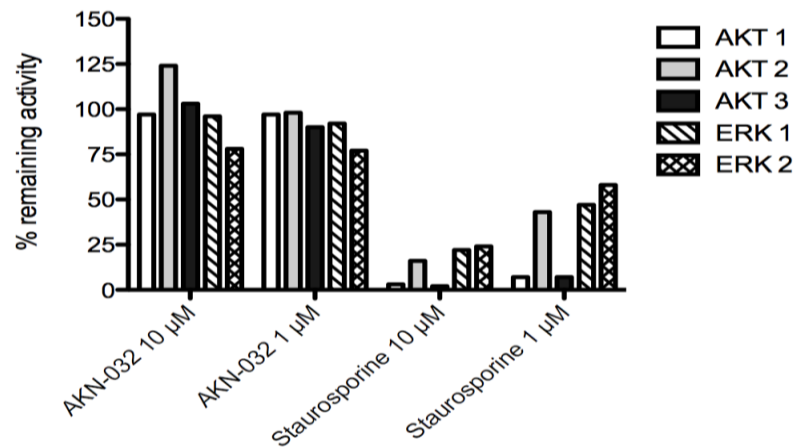


Figure 3 a-d

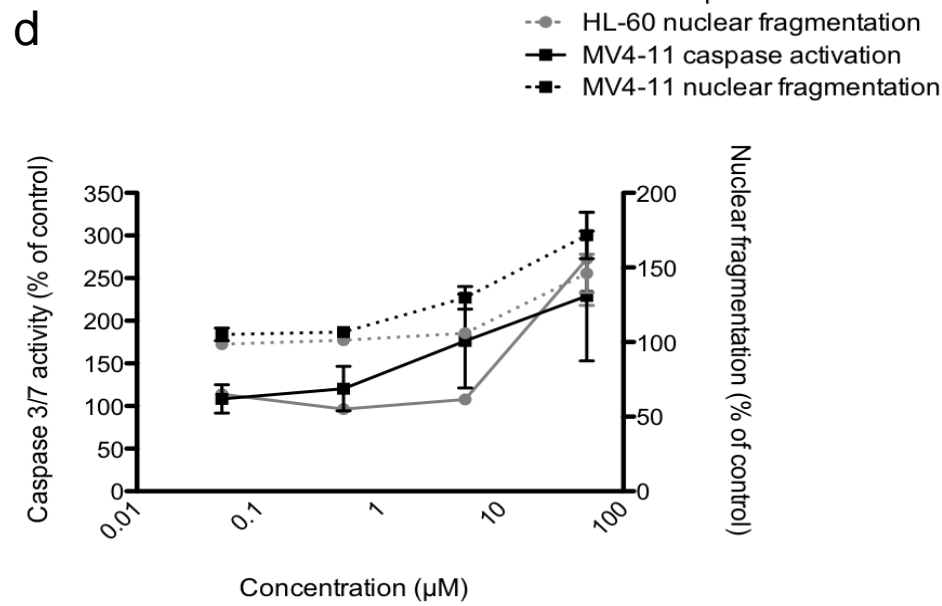
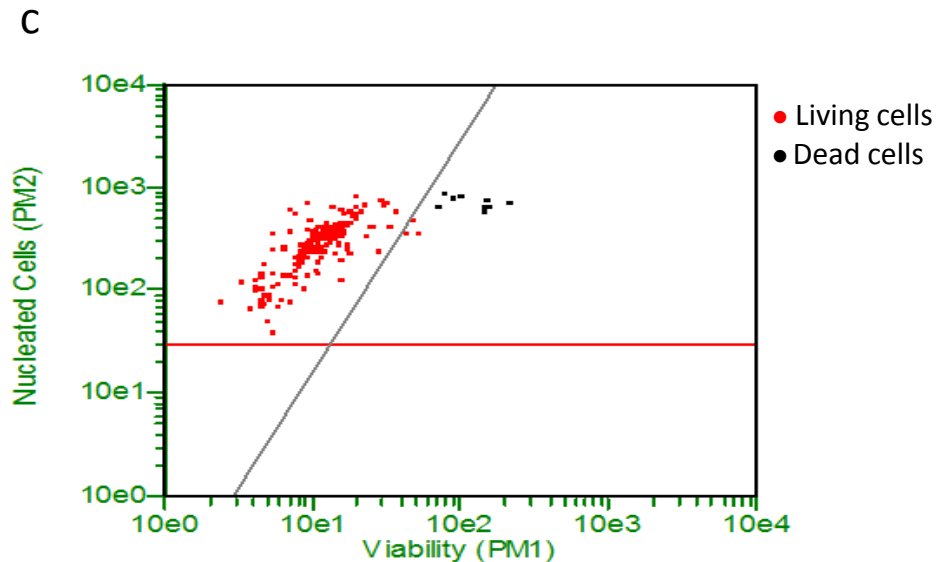
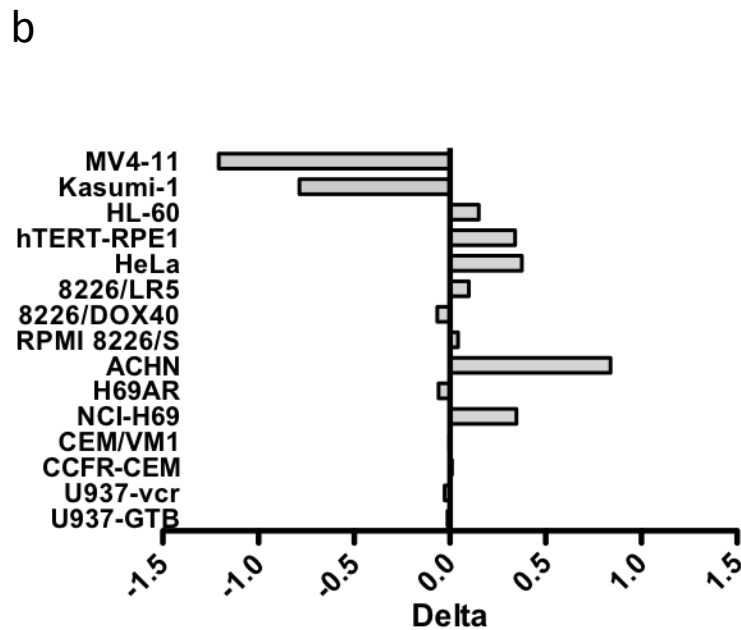
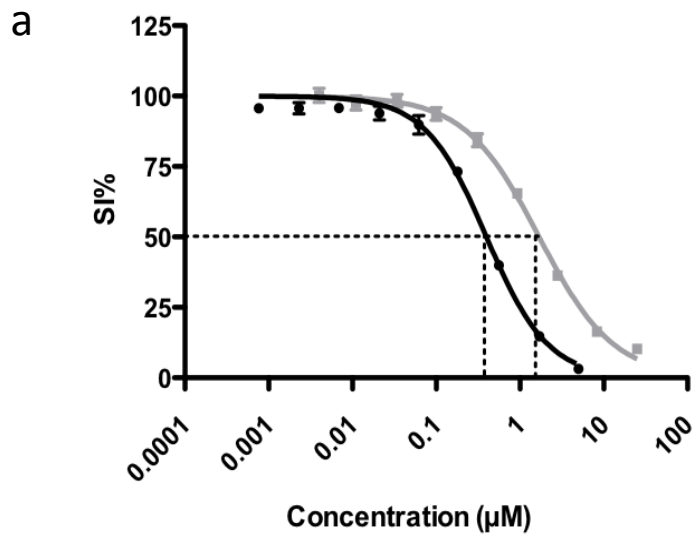
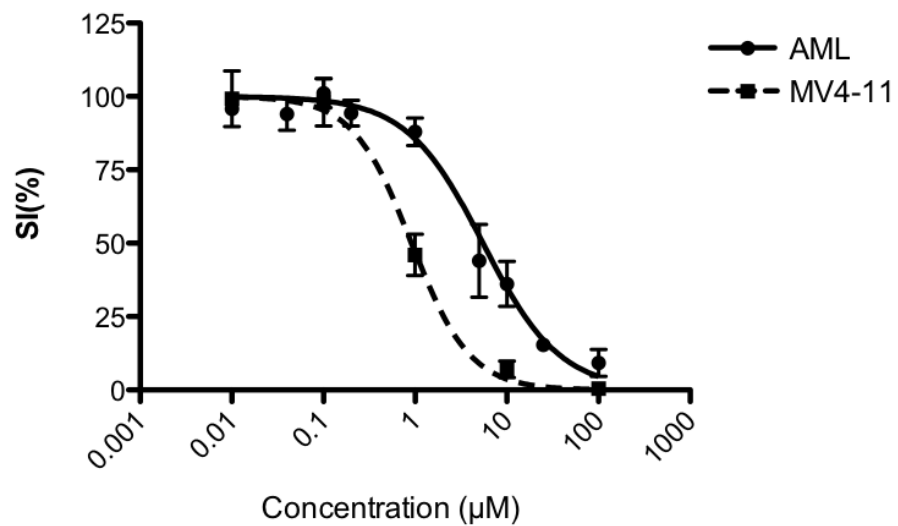
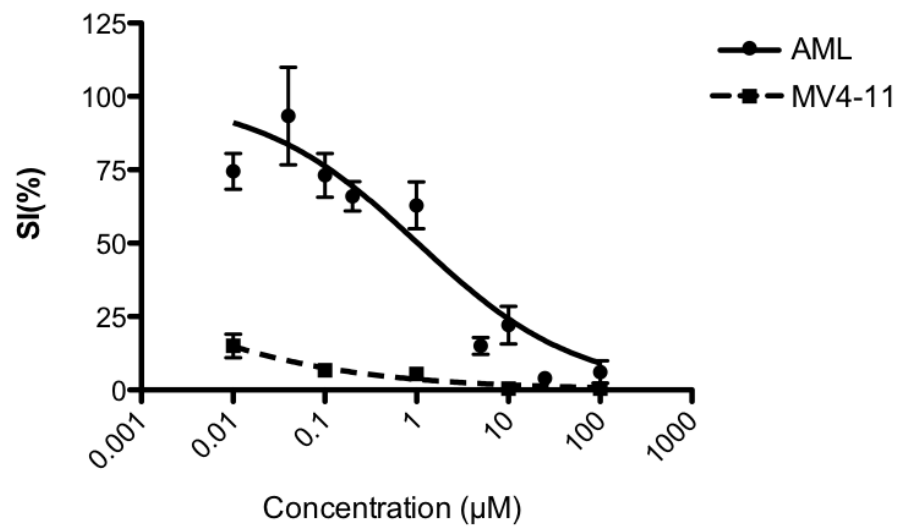


Figure 4a-c

a



b



c

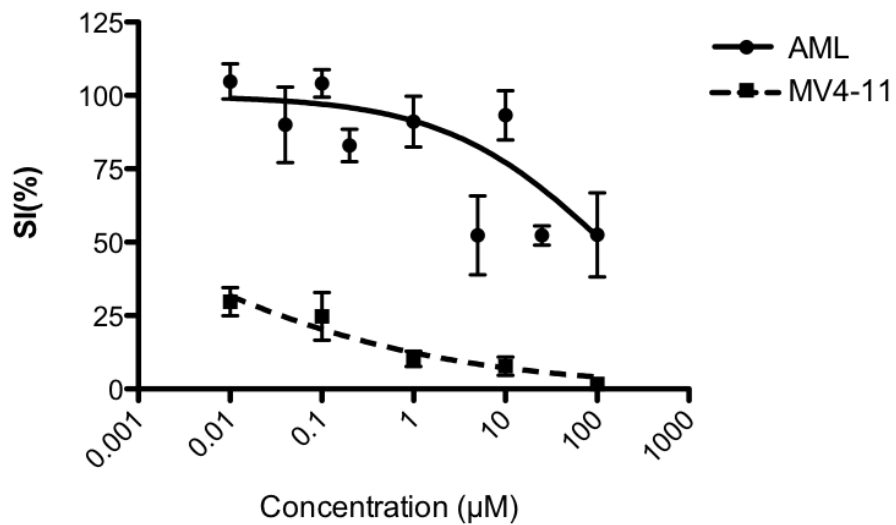
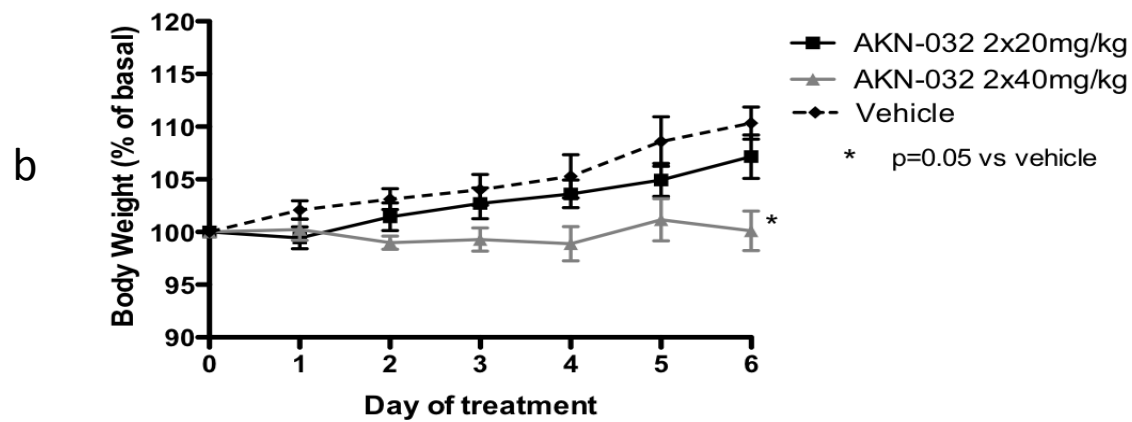
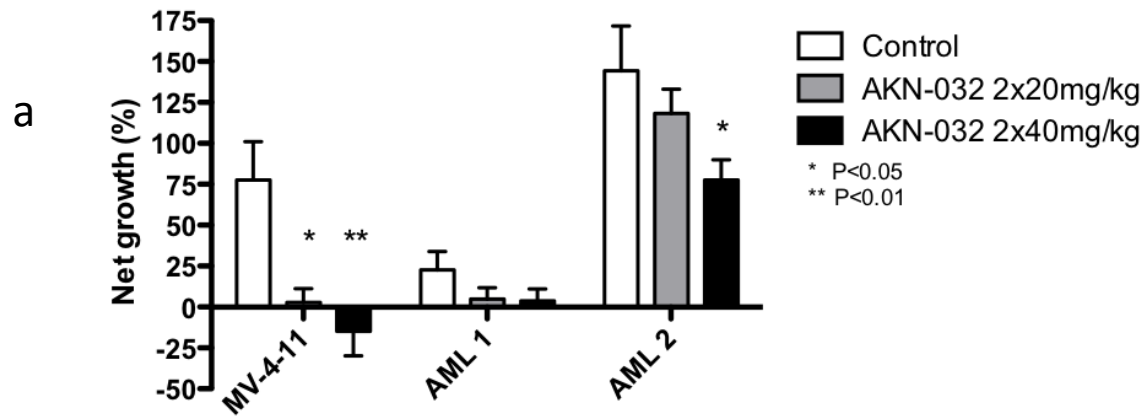


Figure 5 a-c



**c**

Treatment	WBC 10 <sup>9</sup> /L	RBC 10 <sup>12</sup> /L	HGB g/L	HCT L/L	PLT 10 <sup>9</sup> /L
Vehicle	10.8 (0.9)	9.0 (0.3)	150 (3)	0.48 (0.0)	814 (58)
AKN-032 2x20 mg/kg	11.0 (1.0)	8.9 (0.1)	154 (2)	0.48 (0.0)	753 (43)
AKN-032 2x40 mg/kg	8.2 (0.4)**	9.3 (0.3)	155 (3)	0.50 (0.0)	770 (44)

\*\* P<0.01 vs vehicle

## Legends to figures

### Fig 1a-c

**Molecular structures of AKN-032 (a), sunitinib (b) and AB200434 (c).**

### Fig 2a-d

**AKN-032 exposure causes inhibition of FLT3 enzyme.**

Inhibitory activity on FLT3 enzyme of AKN-032 (a) and sunitinib (b) outlined as dose response curves from a typical experiment in the FLT3 enzyme inhibition assay. Western blot demonstrate a reduction of FLT3 autophosphorylation in MV4-11 cells (c) after exposure to three different concentrations of AKN-032. Inhibitory activity (% remaining activity) of AKN-032 and positive control staurosporine on AKT 1,2,3 and ERK 1 and 2 at 10 and 1  $\mu$ M in the radiometric protein kinase assay (d).

### Fig 3a-d

**AKN-032 is cytotoxic to AML cell line MV4-11.**

In vitro cytotoxic activity of AKN-032 and standard cytotoxic agent cytarabine measured by the FMCA in AML cell line MV4-11 (n=4) outlined as dose response curves (mean $\pm$  SEM) (a), and FMCA screening of cytotoxic activity of AKN-032 in the cell line panel displayed as delta  $\log_{10}IC_{50}$  graph (b). The  $IC_{50}$  value for each individual cell line (for details – see Methods) is converted to  $\log_{10}IC_{50}$  and the mean  $\log_{10}IC_{50}$  value of all cell lines is calculated. Delta is defined as the divergence of the  $\log_{10}IC_{50}$  value of one cell line from the panel mean  $\log_{10}IC_{50}$  value. A delta graph is constructed in which cell lines more sensitive than the average present to the left and vice versa. Scatterplot showing the difference in size and staining pattern of Guava Viability

reagent from flow cytometry of MV4-11 cells after exposure to 0,6  $\mu$ M of AKN-032 (c), demonstrating the presence of both living (red) and dead (black) cells. Results from caspase activation assay (d) showing dose-dependent activation of caspase activity (left axis) and nuclear fragmentation (right axis) (mean  $\pm$  SEM, % of vehicle control).

#### **Fig 4a-c**

##### **AKN-032 is cytotoxic to primary AML cells in vitro.**

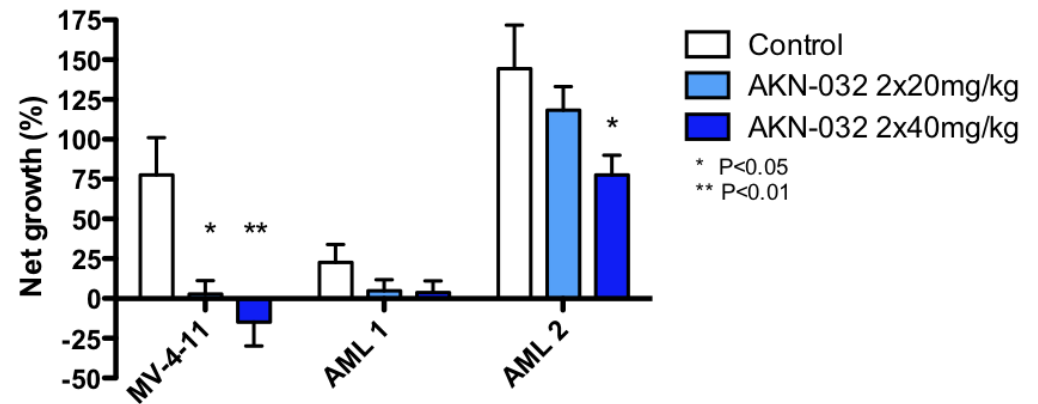
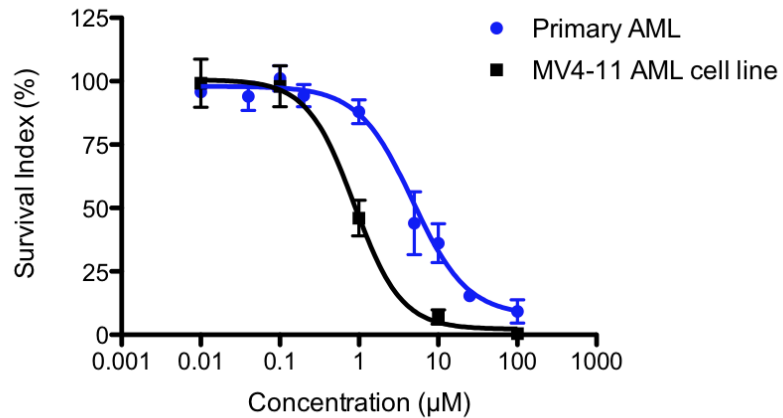
In vitro cytotoxic activity after 72 h exposure to AKN-032 (a), sunitinib (b) and AB200434 (c) in primary patient cells from AML (n=11, mean  $\pm$  SEM), measured by the FMCA, results presented as survival index (SI, %) defined as fluorescence in test wells in per cent of control cultures (cells in culture medium), blank values subtracted.

#### **Fig 5a-c**

##### **AKN-032 inhibits growth of MV4-11 cells and primary AML cells in vivo.**

In vivo activity of low and higher doses of AKN-032 against AML cells (cell line MV4-11 and primary AML cells from two individual patients) in the mouse hollow fiber assay (n=6-8) (a). Results are presented as net growth, defined as the percent change in cell density in the fibers during the 6 days of in vivo experiment (mean + SEM). Body weight development of the animals during the 6 days of the mouse hollow fiber assay (n = 6-8, mean  $\pm$  SEM) (b).

Hematological profile in the animals after the hollow fiber study (c). Blood samples were analyzed on the day of collection (day 6) for the following parameters: white blood cell count (WBC), red blood cell count (RBC), hemoglobin (HGB), hematocrite (HCT) and platelet count (PLT). Results presented as mean  $\pm$  SEM.



Tyrosine kinase inhibitor AKN-032 inhibits AML cell line MV4-11 and primary AML cells in vitro as well as in vivo.