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# Rationally designed hyaluronic acid-based nano-complexes for pentamidine delivery

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## 19    **Abstract**

20    Nanoparticles of polymeric complexes made of hyaluronic acid and polyarginine were investigated  
21    for the encapsulation of the cationic hydrophilic drug pentamidine isethionate. The interaction  
22    between the anionic hyaluronic acid and the cationic pentamidine and the formation of  
23    polyelectrolyte complexes of them were firstly studied. Then, nanoparticles made of mixed  
24    hyaluronic acid / polyarginine loaded with pentamidine were developed as drug delivery systems. A  
25    monodisperse population of negatively charged pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles allowed high  
26    encapsulation rates of pentamidine (80%). Such high encapsulation efficiency coming from ion  
27    exchange was confirmed by measurements of the counterion isethionate released from pentamidine  
28    during nanoparticles formation. Besides, freeze-dried pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles kept their  
29    integrity after their reconstitution in water. *In vitro* studies on human lung (A549) and breast  
30    (MDA-MB-231) cancer cell lines showed that pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles were more  
31    cytotoxic in comparison to the free drug, suggesting an enhanced internalization of encapsulated  
32    drug by cancer cells.

33

## 34    **1. Introduction**

35    Delivery of hydrophilic drugs is a challenge owing to their difficult crossing through cells walls that  
36    limits their therapeutic activity. Encapsulation is often required in order to enhance drug  
37    bioavailability. In case of ionic drugs, complexation with polyelectrolytes of opposite charge is a  
38    suitable methodology as it has been extensively studied for transfection of DNA and siRNA<sup>1,2</sup>.  
39    Upon formation of a charge-stoichiometric complex, the neutral species may undergo precipitation  
40    as nanoparticles, resulting in drug encapsulation inside a nanocarrier. Electrostatic interaction is one  
41    of the driving forces for such complexation. However, electrostatic binding often occurs by an ion  
42    exchange process such that the overall charge balance is null. Non-electrostatic interactions also  
43    matter, so that each system deserves a specific investigation aiming at better mastery over the  
44    encapsulation process.

Over the last decades, the development of pharmaceutical nanocarriers based on natural polysaccharides aroused a growing interest in drug delivery technologies based on ionic complexation<sup>3</sup>. Natural polysaccharides have interesting properties as biocompatibility, biodegradability and low toxicity suitable for biomedical applications<sup>4-6</sup>. Besides, they bear a large variety of reactive groups, a wide range of molar masses ( $M_w$ ), varying chemical compositions and origins, which make them a versatile biomaterial for the preparation of nanometric carriers<sup>7</sup>.

Among the different natural polysaccharides, hyaluronic acid (HA) has been widely used in the pharmaceutical field because of its interesting physicochemical and biological properties<sup>8,9</sup>. HA belongs to the class of anionic glycosaminoglycans (GAGs) formed by several identical subunits (D-glucuronic acid and N-acetyl-D-glucosamine disaccharide) bound together by  $\beta$ -1,4 and  $\beta$ -1,3 glycosidic bonds<sup>10,11</sup>. HA is an important component of the extracellular matrix (ECM) highly distributed throughout connective, epithelial, and neural tissues in which plays essential physiological roles<sup>8</sup>. HA backbone itself is endowed with targeting moieties that specifically recognize and interact with different cell surface proteins like stabilin-2, RHAMM, lymphatic vessel endothelial hyaluronan receptor 1 (LYVE-1), and CD44. Also, low molar mass HA regulates Toll Like Receptor (TRL). Among all these receptors, CD44 represents the most studied HA-receptor in inflammation and tumor pathologies<sup>9,12,13</sup>.

Therefore, specific targeting of these receptors has been exploited as an effective strategy for increasing accumulation of associated drug at the target site<sup>14,15</sup>. In addition, HA bears a carboxylic group in each glucuronic unit (pKa 3-4) which provides an acidic polyelectrolyte character enabling interactions with cationic polymers or molecules possessing appropriate basic groups for formation of complexes<sup>16</sup>.

So far, exploitation of HA properties to polymeric conjugates, liposomes, microparticles, and nanoparticles have been attempted. Such dosage forms are generally obtained through formation of self-assembling micelles, chemical conjugation via cross-linking approaches or ionic gelation<sup>16-19</sup>.

Among these techniques, polyelectrolyte complexation represents the most widely used method to

tailor HA-based drug delivery systems, because of the mild processing conditions, absence of organic solvents and wide range of cationic polymers undergoing interactions with HA<sup>20</sup>. Several previous works disclosed instances showing the ability of HA-based polyelectrolyte nanostructures to associate active compounds such as genetic materials or positively charged drugs<sup>9</sup>. Contreras-Ruiz et al. described nanoparticles made of HA complexed with chitosan (CS) oligomers for pDNA delivery. HA-CS complexes entered cells and yielded significant transfection of pDNA into the corneal and conjunctival cells<sup>21</sup>. Recently, a novel ionic metal complex based on HA and an oxaliplatin derivative, dichloro(1,2-diaminocyclohexane)platinum(II) (DACHPt), has been patented. Compared to the DACHPt aqueous solution injected intravenously, DACHPt-loaded nano-complexes protected the associated drug from enzymatic degradation, thereby enhancing plasmatic concentration while lowering drug elimination rate<sup>22</sup>. Also, Battistini et al. reported a doxorubicin-HA ionic complex as a tumor targeting drug delivery system. *In vitro* studies on tumor cells overexpressing CD44 receptors demonstrated the improved internalization of the complexes in comparison to the free drug<sup>14</sup>.

Based on this background information, the present work deals with an extensive physicochemical characterization of polyelectrolyte complexes (PECs) made of HA and a cationic molecule, pentamidine isethionate (PTM) as a model drug. PTM is well known for its antiprotozoal, antifungal and anticancer activity<sup>23,24</sup>. It is a water-soluble molecule with two terminal amidine groups, protonated in a wide pH range ( $pK_a = 12-13$ ) including physiological/neutral conditions. To stabilize PTM-HA PECs and maximize the amount of associated PTM, polyarginine (PArg) was used to crosslink HA and form nanoparticles (NPs). PArg is a biocompatible cationic poly(aminoacid) belonging to the cell-penetrating peptide polymers able to improve intracellular delivery of therapeutic agents<sup>25</sup>. At neutral pH, the amine groups of PArg are protonated and interact with carboxylic moieties of HA, leading to the formation of NPs. Also, polyion complexes made of HA and protamine, have been described and developed for the encapsulation of different active compounds<sup>26,27</sup>. In the current work, the formation of PECs made of HA and PTM and NPs

97    **made of HA and PArg were investigated by** studying size and zeta potential of NPs and quantifying  
98    the amount of isethionate, the PTM counterion, released during the formation process while varying  
99    the relative concentrations of the PECs-forming components. Lyophilization studies were also  
100    carried out in order to ensure preservation of pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles (PTM-loaded NPs)  
101    as a dry form upon long-term storage. The morphology of the formed particles was analyzed by  
102    transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and cryogenic-transmission electron microscopy (Cryo-  
103    TEM). Finally, *in vitro* studies were performed on lung and breast human cell lines (A549 and  
104    MDA–MB 231) to assess the anticancer activity of encapsulated PTM.

105

## 106        **2. Experimental section**

### 107        **2.1. Materials**

108    Sodium hyaluronate (HA) (weight-average molar mass,  $M_w = 3.9 \times 10^4 \text{ g} \cdot \text{mol}^{-1}$ ) was purchased from  
109    LifeCore<sup>®</sup> Biomedical (Chaska, Minnesota, USA). Poly (L-arginine hydrochloride) (PArg) (weight-  
110    average molar mass,  $M_w = 5.8 \times 10^3 \text{ g} \cdot \text{mol}^{-1}$ ) was purchased from Alamanda<sup>®</sup> Polymers (Huntsville,  
111    Alabama, USA) and pentamidine isethionate (PTM) (molar mass,  $M_{\text{mol}} = 592.679 \text{ g} \cdot \text{mol}^{-1}$ ) from  
112    Sigma-Aldrich<sup>®</sup> (St Quentin-Fallavier, France). Milli-Q water was obtained using a milli-Q  
113    Academic System (Merck Millipore<sup>®</sup>, St Quentin-Fallavier, France). Sodium silicotungstate used  
114    for staining in TEM was supplied from Agar Scientific (Parsonage Lane, Stansted, UK). Dulbecco's  
115    Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) without glucose, glutamine, phenol red and sodium pyruvate  
116    was bought from Gibco<sup>®</sup> (Thermo Fisher Scientific<sup>®</sup>, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA) and used to  
117    evaluate the stability in physiological medium. Human lung carcinoma cells (A549) and human  
118    breast adenocarcinoma cells (MDA-MB-231) were from ATCC and grown in complete Dulbecco's  
119    Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (Thermo Fisher  
120    Scientific<sup>®</sup>), 100 U/mL penicillin (Thermo Fisher Scientific<sup>®</sup>), 100 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> streptomycin (Thermo  
121    Fisher Scientific<sup>®</sup>) and 1% L-glutamine (Life Technologies<sup>®</sup>). 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-

122 diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich® (St Quentin-Fallavier,  
123 France).

124

## 125 **2.2. Solubility study of pentamidine**

126 Saturated solutions of PTM at different pH (pH 7.4, 9, 10, 12) and in phosphate buffer saline (PBS,  
127 pH 7.4) were prepared. The solutions were stirred for 2 h at room temperature and left overnight to  
128 reach equilibrium. Then, all samples were centrifuged (62,000 g, 30 min, 20 °C) and the  
129 supernatant was analyzed for PTM by measuring its UV absorbance at 270 nm (UV-1280,  
130 Shimadzu, Marne-la-Vallée, France).

131

## 132 **2.3. Preparation of pentamidine-hyaluronic acid polyelectrolyte complexes**

133 Pentamidine-hyaluronic acid polyelectrolyte complexes (PTM-HA PECs) were prepared by mixing  
134 aqueous solutions of PTM and HA at different PTM/HA mole ratios ranging between 0.2 and 2.4.  
135 Seven different PTM-HA PECs were obtained by adding 0.5 mL of HA aqueous solution  
136 ( $2.5 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ ) into 0.5 mL of PTM aqueous solution of concentrations ranging from 0.6 to  
137  $9 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ . Size, polydispersity index, electrophoretic mobility and pH of PECs were studied.

138

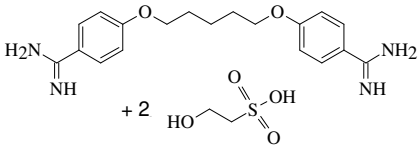
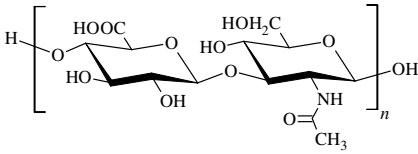
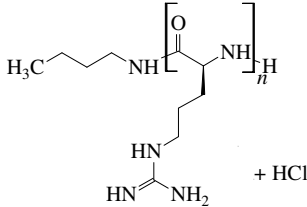
## 139 **2.4. Preparation of blank and pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles**

140 Blank nanoparticles (HA-PArg NPs) were prepared by polyelectrolyte complexation using a similar  
141 methodology of ionic gelation<sup>20</sup>. Briefly, 0.5 mL of an anionic HA solution at different  
142 concentrations ranging from 1.25 to  $5.00 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$  were added to an equal volume of solution  
143 containing cationic polyarginine (PArg) ( $0.27 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ ). Nine different formulations with HA/PArg  
144 mole ratio between 0.82 to 8.25 were prepared.

145 Pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles (PTM-loaded NPs) were obtained by mixing 0.5 mL of aqueous  
146 solution of PTM at concentrations ranging from  $0.50$  to  $0.17 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$  and 0.5 mL of cationic PArg  
147 solution at  $0.18 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ . This premix was left under agitation during 10 min, and 0.5 mL of HA

148 solution of concentrations ranging from 0.83 to 3.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> were added. The mole ratio between  
 149 HA (negatively charged) and PArg plus PTM (both positively charged) was ranging between 1.13  
 150 and 4.51. HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs were characterized in terms of pH, size,  
 151 polydispersity index, zeta potential and encapsulation efficiency. The main characteristics of all the  
 152 compounds used to obtain PECs and NPs are listed in Table 1.

154 **Table 1.** Chemical characteristics of the compounds used to obtain polyelectrolyte complexes and  
 155 nanoparticles. The molar masses given for polymers are that of their repeat unit.

Compound	Molecular Formula	Molecular structure	pKa	$M_w$ (g·mol <sup>-1</sup> )
Pentamidine isethionate	C <sub>23</sub> H <sub>36</sub> N <sub>4</sub> O <sub>10</sub> S <sub>2</sub>		12.13	592.7
Sodium Hyaluronate	(C <sub>14</sub> H <sub>20</sub> NO <sub>11</sub> Na) <sub>n</sub>		2.87	3.9·10 <sup>4</sup>
Poly(L-arginine hydrochloride)	(C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>14</sub> N <sub>4</sub> O <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>n</sub>		12.42	5.8·10 <sup>3</sup>

## 157 2.5. Physicochemical characterization of polyelectrolyte complexes, blank and 158 pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

159 Size distribution and surface potential of the prepared particles (PECs and NPs) were analyzed  
 160 using a Malvern Zetasizer® (model Nano ZS, Malvern Panalytical, Malvern, UK). Particle size  
 161 distributions were determined by Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) of samples diluted with milli-Q



water. Analyses were carried out at 25 °C with a scattering angle of 173°. Particle size distribution was determined using the cumulants method that provides the *z*-average diameter and the polydispersity index (*Pdl*). The zeta potential ( $\zeta$ ) was determined from the electrophoretic mobility ( $u_E$ ) (Equation 1). For all measurements, samples were diluted in milli-Q water and placed in a U-shaped fold capillary cell (DTS1070) made of polystyrene and containing two electrodes of gold-plated beryllium/copper (Malvern).  $\zeta$  potential was calculated according to the Henry Equation<sup>28</sup> under the Smoluchowski approximation of the Henry factor  $f(\kappa a)$ :

$$u_E = \frac{2}{3} \frac{\varepsilon_0 \varepsilon \zeta}{\eta} f(\kappa a) \quad (1)$$

where  $\eta$  is the viscosity of water ( $\eta = 0.887$  mPa·s at 25°C),  $\kappa$  is the inverse Debye length,  $a$  is the radius of particles, and  $f(\kappa a) = 3/2$ .

Turbidity of PECs was monitored by absorbance measurements at 600 nm using an UV spectrometer (UV-1280 from Shimadzu, Marne-la-Vallée, France) equipped with a cuvette with an optical path of 10 mm. The turbidity ( $\tau$ ) was calculated from the absorbance (*Abs*) reading as  $\tau = \ln(10) Abs = 2.3 Abs$ .

## 2.6. Ion-exchange chromatography

Isethionate ions released due to association of positively charged PTM to negatively charged HA were quantified using ion exchange chromatography (IC) (930 Compact IC Flex, Metrohm, Switzerland) equipped with a chemical suppressor and conductivity detection. PTM-loaded NPs were centrifuged (7,000 g, 30 min, 25 °C) using Amicon<sup>®</sup> filter (Amicon Ultra-0.5, 30,000 NMWL, Millipore, Darmstadt, Germany), supernatants were recovered and injected into the IC. The analyses were conducted using Metrosep a Supp 5 250/4.0 column with an adequate pre-column at a temperature of 30°C. For the detection of anions, the mobile phase was 8 mmol·L<sup>-1</sup> solution of Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> (Fischer Scientific, Illkirch, France) prepared in ultrapure water (resistivity > 18 MΩ·cm), filtered at 0.45 µm and degassed in an ultrasonic bath prior to use. The flow rate was 0.7 mL·min<sup>-1</sup>.

187 Such conditions ensured linearity of calibration curve in a range from 0.005 to 5 mmol·L<sup>-1</sup> of  
188 isethionate concentration.

189

## 190 **2.7. Morphology of blank and loaded nanoparticles using transmission and cryogenic** 191 **electron microscopy**

192 Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was performed with a Philips CM120 microscope at  
193 “Centre Technologique des Microstructures” (CTμ) at the University of Lyon 1 (Villeurbanne,  
194 France). A small drop of suspension (5 μL) was deposited on a carbon/formvar microscope grid  
195 (Delta Microscopies, Saint-Ybars, France), stained with a 1% w/w sodium silicotungstate aqueous  
196 solution, and slowly dried in open air. The dry samples were observed by TEM under 120 kV  
197 acceleration voltage.

198 Regarding cryogenic-transmission electron microscopy (Cryo-TEM), diluted samples of HA-PArg  
199 NPs and PTM-loaded NPs were dropped onto 300 mesh holey carbon films (Quantifoil R2/1) and  
200 quench-frozen in liquid ethane using a cryo-plunge workstation (made at Laboratoire de Physique  
201 des Solides-LPS Orsay, France). The specimens were then mounted on a precooled Gatan 626  
202 specimen holder, transferred in the microscope (Phillips CM120) and observed at an accelerating  
203 voltage of 120 kV.

204

## 205 **2.8. Association efficiency and loading capacity of pentamidine into nanoparticles**

206 The association efficiency (AE) of PTM into loaded NPs was determined using an indirect method  
207 by measurements of the concentration of free PTM in the aqueous phase. PTM-loaded NPs were  
208 centrifuged (7,000 g, 30 min, 25°C) using Amicon<sup>®</sup> filter (Amicon Ultra-0.5, 30.000 NMWL,  
209 Merck Millipore<sup>®</sup>, Burlington, Massachusetts, USA), supernatants were recovered and analyzed for  
210 free PTM using UV absorbance at 270 nm. Calibration was performed using PTM solutions at  
211 different concentrations from 2.5 μg·mL<sup>-1</sup> to 30 μg·mL<sup>-1</sup>. From the AE values, the loading capacity  
212 (LC) of PTM-loaded NPs was calculated using the following Equations 2 and 3 respectively:

$$AE(\%) = \frac{\text{Total drug} - \text{Free drug in supernatant}}{\text{Total drug}} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

$$LC(\%) = \frac{\text{Mass of associatated drug}}{\text{Mass of nanoparticles}} \times 100 \quad (3)$$

All measurements were performed in triplicate using PTM aqueous solution as control.

## 2.9. Stability studies of blank and pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

Colloidal stability of HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs was evaluated over 4 weeks under storage at 4 °C. Size, polydispersity index and  $\zeta$  potential were analyzed every week. Leakage of the drug was also evaluated at the end of the storage period. The stability in DMEM without glucose, glutamine, phenol red and sodium pyruvate was tested to check the effect of protein factors on NPs aggregation.

## 2.10. *In vitro* release study of pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

*In vitro* release behavior of PTM-loaded NPs in simulated physiological conditions (PBS at 37 °C) was performed using a bicompartamental diffusion device (Franz cells) mounted with a semi-synthetic cellulose membrane (6-8 kDa MWCO from Spectra/Por, Spectrum Laboratories, The Netherlands). To ensure sink condition, 2 mL of PTM-loaded NPs prepared using 2.3 and 3.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA and 0.50 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of PTM were placed in the upper part of the cell (donor chamber). The lower part of the cell (receptor chamber) was filled with 10 mL of release media (PBS, pH 7.4 at 37 °C) with an horizontal shaking. At different time points (15 min, 30 min, 1 h, 2 h, 3 h, 4 h, 6 h, 8 h, 24 h, 48 h, 72 h), 1 mL of each sample was collected and analyzed for PTM using UV absorption (at 270 nm). The amount of drug released over time was calculated from the difference between the initial total amount of the drug present in PTM-loaded NPs and the amount

237 of PTM present in the receptor chamber. The experiments were performed for both NPs in  
238 triplicate.

239

## 240 **2.11. Freeze-drying studies of blank and loaded pentamidine nanoparticles**

241 Once the development of NPs has been completed, HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs were  
242 freeze-dried using CRYONEXT pilot freeze dryer (Cryotec, Saint-Gély-du-Fesc, France). During  
243 the formulation step, the bulking agent mannitol was added to the formulations at different  
244 concentration (5%, 10% w/v). The freeze-drying program consisted of an initial freezing at -20°C in  
245 a freezer for 12 h. After that, the freeze-dryer was pre-cooled at -20°C and samples were introduced  
246 therein. Then, the temperature was decreased to -50°C at a rate of 1°C·min<sup>-1</sup> and this temperature  
247 was kept for 12 h. The sublimation step was carried out at a temperature between -35°C and 5 °C  
248 and a pressure between 0.100 and 0.3000 mbar according to the recipe. Finally, a secondary drying  
249 step was carried out at 35 °C and 0.010 mbar. After freeze-drying, HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded  
250 NPs were resuspended in 1 mL of milli-Q water and left under magnetic stirring for 30 min. Size,  
251 polydispersity and association efficiency of nanoparticles were measured before and after  
252 resuspension. Also, morphological observations using TEM were performed.

253

## 254 **2.12. *In vitro* cell viability studies**

255 Human lung carcinoma cells (A549) and human breast adenocarcinoma cells (MDA-MB-231) were  
256 used to evaluate the cell viability. Cells (3000 cells/well) were seeded in 96 well plates in 100 µL  
257 media and left to adhere for 24 h. Then, the medium was replaced with a fresh one containing  
258 different concentrations (0.01-100 µM) of free PTM, HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs. After  
259 72 h of exposure, metabolically active cells were quantified by 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-  
260 diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) assay according to the supplier's instructions. Briefly, 20 µL  
261 of MTT reagent (5 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup>) was added in each well and the plate was incubated at 37 °C for 2 h.  
262 After that the supernatant was replaced by 100 µL of isopropanol/HCl/H<sub>2</sub>O (90/1/9 v/v/v) and the

optical density was measured at 540 nm for purple intensity and at 690 nm for the subtraction of background using a multiwell-scanning spectrophotometer (Multiskan Ascent, Labsystems SA, Cergy-pontoise, France). Cell viability from the absorbance values was calculated using the following Equation 4:

$$Cell\ viability\ (\%) = \frac{Abs_{treated}}{Abs_{untreated}} \times 100 \quad (4)$$

IC50 values were determined using the CompuSyn software.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Solubility of pentamidine at different pH

PTM isethionate is a synthetic amidine derivative, highly soluble in water ( $> 30\text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ ) having a  $pK_a$  of 12.5. Its solubility was above  $30\text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$  in the pH range from 3 to 10 due to the ionization of amidine groups, while at pH values higher than 12 the solubility was drastically reduced ( $6.5\text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ ). Solubility also depended on ionic strength as the solubility of PTM in PBS pH 7.4 was around  $6.9\text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ . This decrease of PTM solubility could be due to an increase of the concentration of inert ions in the medium that causes a salting-out effect <sup>29</sup>.

#### 3.2. Preparation and physicochemical characterization of pentamidine-hyaluronic acid polyelectrolyte

Polyelectrolyte complexes (PECs) are defined as complexes formed through electrostatic interactions between oppositely charged structures. The formation of PTM-HA PECs was based on the electrostatic interaction between the positively charged drug PTM containing two guanidine groups, and the negatively charged polysaccharide HA which contains one carboxylic group for each repeat unit made of two sugar residues, neutral N-acetyl-D-glucosamine and negatively charged sodium salt of D-glucuronic acid as defined in Table 1.

287 The stoichiometry of the complex was defined as the PTM/HA mole ratio of PTM molecules to HA  
 288 repeat units. Different PTM-HA PECs having a mole ratio PTM/HA between 0.2 and 2.4 and the  
 289 mass ratio from 0.24 to 3.6 (PEC A - PEC G) were obtained (Table 2). HA solution was added to an  
 290 equal volume of PTM at different concentration under magnetic stirring. Since the concentration of  
 291 the low molar mass electrolyte strongly affects the formation of the complexes, only the amount of  
 292 PTM was varied<sup>30</sup>.  
 293 All the formulations were prepared at pH values around 6-7 in order to obtain an optimal charge  
 294 density that generates attractive interactions between the PTM and HA.

295

296 **Table 2.** Formulation code for PTM-HA PECs. Mole ratio, mass ratio and pH values are given.

Complexes	Mole ratio PTM/HA	Mass ratio PTM/HA	pH
PEC A	0.16	0.24	7.17
PEC B	0.34	0.5	7.07
PEC C	0.67	1.0	6.78
PEC D	0.94	1.48	6.76
PEC E	1.48	2.2	6.79
PEC F	2.01	3.0	6.65
PEC G	2.42	3.6	7.17

297

298 The concentration regime of HA solutions was devised by taking measurements of overlapping  
 299 concentrations ( $C^*$ ) for aqueous solution of HA of various molar masses reported by Dodero et al.<sup>31</sup>  
 300 and extrapolating them down to the present low molar mass of HA (20 kDa). This gave  $C^* =$   
 301  $15 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ . The largest present HA concentration of  $2.5 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$  was much lower than  $C^*$ ,  
 302 showing that HA concentrations were in the dilute regime.

303 DLS measurements were performed in order to study possible interactions between HA and PTM.  
 304 Figure 1A shows the experimental time correlation function as a function of time (at a scattering  
 305 angle of  $173^\circ$ ). For all PEC solutions, the correlation function showed a trimodal profile. This  
 306 distribution was due to the existence of fast and slow relaxation modes in molecular motions.

307 The correlation function of the scattered amplitude  $G^{(1)}(t)$  was modeled as the sum of three  
 308 exponential decays as in Equation 5 (Figure 2A):

309

$$310 \quad G^{(1)}(t) = A_1 e^{-\frac{t}{\tau_1}} + A_2 e^{-\frac{t}{\tau_2}} + A_3 e^{-\frac{t}{\tau_3}} \quad (5)$$

311

312 where  $A_i$  and  $\tau_i$  ( $i = 1, 2, 3$ ) are the relative scattered intensities and relaxation times for the three  
 313 relaxation modes respectively ( $A_1 + A_2 + A_3 = 1$ ). The first term in the right hand side of Equation 5  
 314 is the fastest relaxation corresponding to the fastest motions. It was associated with the lateral  
 315 diffusion of isolated HA-PTM complexes characterized by a mutual diffusion coefficient  $D$  ( $\tau_1^{-1} =$   
 316  $Dq^2$ ). The diameter of such species given by the Stokes-Einstein relationship ( $D = \frac{kT}{3\pi\eta \text{ Diam}}$ ) was  
 317 12-14 nm (Figure 2B), in agreement with the expected size of a random coil of  $3.9 \cdot 10^4 \text{ g.mol}^{-1}$  HA.  
 318 The second term is a slower mode that was ascribed to associations (aggregates) of HA-PTM  
 319 macromolecules of mean size in the range 300-500 nm (Figure 1B). This interpretation was  
 320 suggested by observations of such aggregates in dilute solutions of HA reported by Maleki et al.<sup>32</sup>,  
 321 and in more complex systems containing HA<sup>33,34</sup>. The nature of the third mode was difficult to  
 322 figure out. The diameter of particles that would correspond to a translational diffusion was  
 323 unrealistically large ( $\sim 50 \mu\text{m}$ ) because they were not observed by optical microscopy. The origin of  
 324 this third slowest relaxation might stand from slow internal motions inside HA-PTM aggregates that  
 325 are not translational diffusion.

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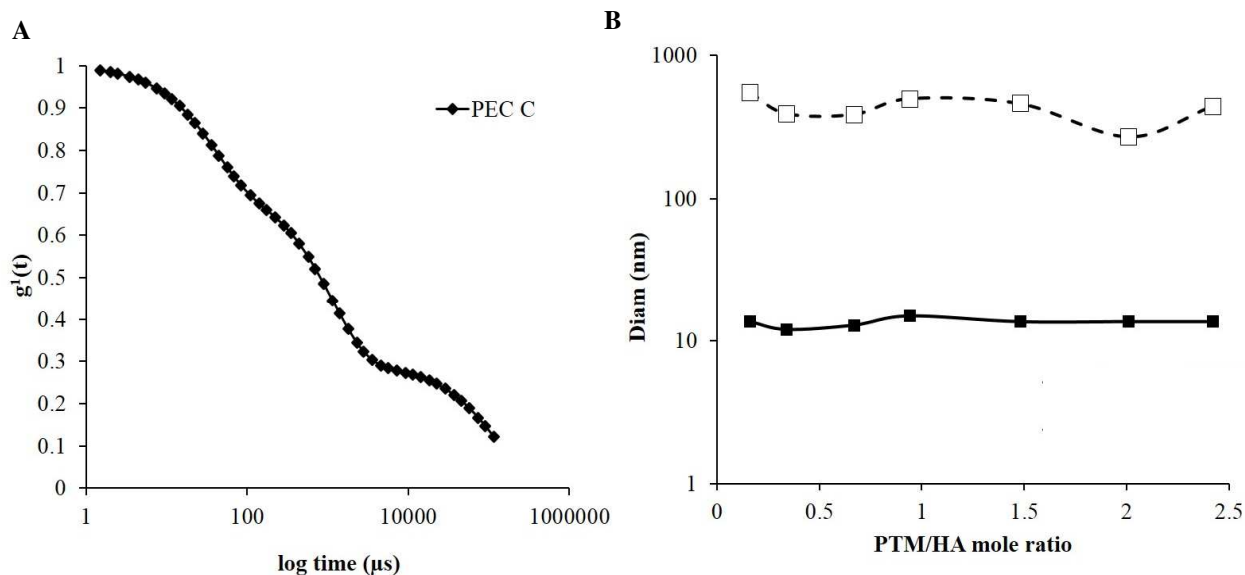
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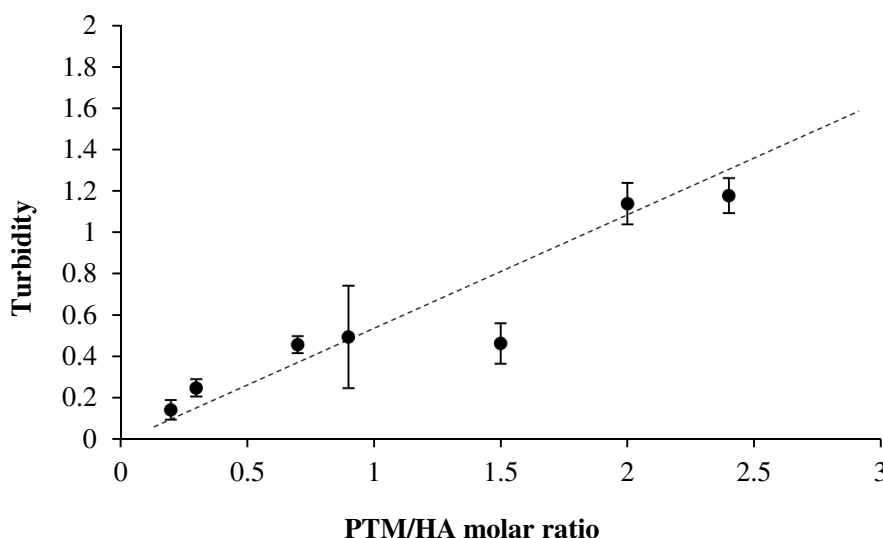
332



333 **Figure 1.** A) Normalized curve of correlation function ( $g^1(t)$ ) versus time of PECs C. The curve is  
 334 fitted with the aid of the Equation 5 (see text). B) Diameter (nm) of aggregated ( $\square$ ) and isolated ( $\blacksquare$ )  
 335 PEC.

336

337 Turbidity measurements of PTM-HA PECs provided a complement of the conclusions drawn from  
 338 DLS (Figure 2). A slight increase of turbidity was first observed as more PTM was added to HA  
 339 indicating that HA polymeric chains tended to overlap and associate each other's. As an outcome,  
 340 both DLS and turbidity measurements revealed aggregation of HA as association with PTM was  
 341 proceeding. The origin of such associations was probably a more hydrophobic character of the  
 342 PECs as the organic PTM cations bind to HA. This provided an indirect indication for the binding  
 343 of PTM to HA by means of electrostatic interaction between the two polyions.



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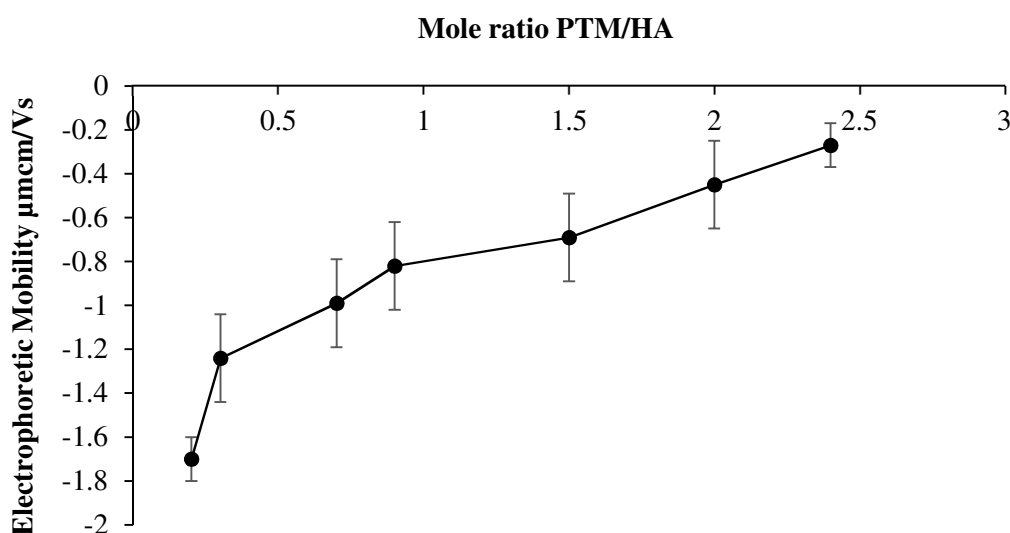
345 **Figure 2.** Turbidity ( $\lambda = 600$  nm) of PTM/Ha PECs as a function of PTM/Ha mole ratio. PEC A  
 346 PTM/Ha = 0.2, PEC B PTM/Ha = 0.3, PEC C PTM/Ha = 0.7, PEC D PTM/Ha = 0.9, PEC E  
 347 PTM/Ha = 1.5, PEC F PTM/Ha = 2.0, PEC G PTM/Ha = 2.4. Values are given as mean  $\pm$  Sem ( $n$   
 348 = 3).

349

350 Stronger binding of PTM cations than  $\text{Na}^+$  coming from the divalent and hydrophobic natures of  
 351 PTM was more directly detected by measurements of electrophoretic mobility (Figure 3).



352 Electrophoretic mobility ( $u_E$ ) was negative over the whole range of PTM/HA stoichiometry,  
 353 progressively shifting toward no mobility corresponding to electrical neutrality as increasing the  
 354 concentration of PTM. Electrophoretic mobility experiments clearly indicated an increase of  
 355 complexation at high PTM/HA mole ratio.



356  
 357 **Figure 3.** Electrophoretic mobility ( $u_E$ ) of PTM-HA PECs in function of mole ratio PTM/HA (from  
 358 0.24 to 2.4). Values are given as mean  $\pm$  *sem* ( $n = 3$ ).

359  
 360 As an overall outcome, the conformation of the polymeric chain, turbidity and electrophoretic  
 361 mobility measurements, confirmed the complexation of PTM by HA. Moreover, the electrostatic  
 362 binding of PTM to HA was weak because the PTM cation was only divalent. Since the association  
 363 of polyelectrolytes of opposite charges is usually quite strong, a cationic polyelectrolyte  
 364 (polyarginine, PArg) was added in order to help at precipitation of nanoparticles and improve the  
 365 encapsulation of PTM.

### 366 367 **3.3. Preparation and physicochemical characterization of the blank hyaluronic acid-** 368 **polyarginine nanoparticles**

369 To enhance the formation of NPs, the cationic poly(aminoacid) PArg was used as a cross-linking  
 370 agent causing the formation of insoluble PECs and thereby allowing for the formation of  
 371 nanoparticles. HA-PArg NPs were prepared by polyelectrolyte complexation in a similar manner as  
 372 described by Oyarzun-Ampuero et al.<sup>20</sup> Five hundred microliters of a solution containing HA at  
 373 different concentrations (from 1.25 to 5 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup>) were added to an aqueous solution of PArg  
 374 (0.27 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup>) under magnetic stirring at room temperature for 30 min. The formation of NPs was  
 375 ensured by the electrostatic interaction between the positively charged groups of PArg and the  
 376 negatively charged carboxylate groups of HA. All the different formulations of HA-PArg NPs  
 377 (Blank A - Blank I) were studied for their size, polydispersity index (*PdI*) and  $\zeta$  potential (Table 3).  
 378 The average size of the resulting blank NPs ranged between 112 and 244 nm with a low  
 379 polydispersity index (*PdI* < 0.2). Values of  $\zeta$  potential ranged from +33 to -22 mV. When the  
 380 charge ratio HA/PArg was lower than 1.24, NPs had a size around 120 nm with a positive  $\zeta$  value  
 381 (+33 mV), indicating that the charge brought about by PArg was larger than that of HA. At mole  
 382 ratio higher than 1.24, NPs size increased from 166 to 244 nm, and an inversion of  $\zeta$  potential to  
 383 -31 mV occurred. The increase in the hydrodynamic size was correlated to the amount of HA used  
 384 to obtain the NPs. Besides, inversion of surface potential indicated a conformational change which  
 385 exposes carboxylic groups of HA in excess with respect to cationic groups of PArg towards the  
 386 external surface of NPs. Globally, the HA/PArg interaction allows the preparation of NPs of 100-  
 387 250 nm size with a narrow size distribution and reversal of the electrical charge according to the  
 388 charge ratio of the two polymers.

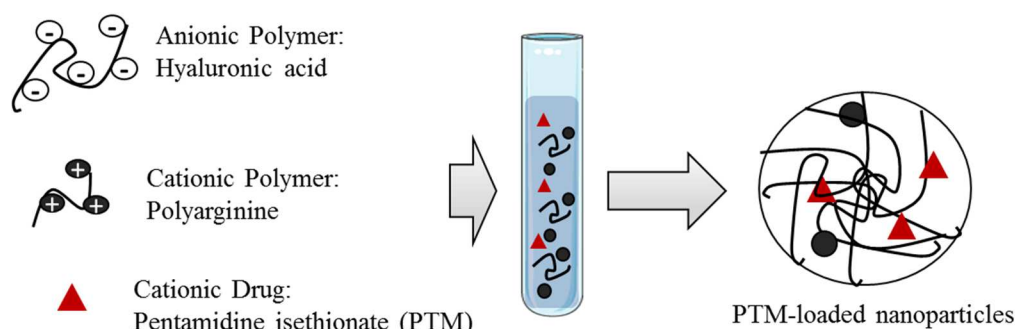
389  
 390 **Table 3.** Physicochemical characteristics of HA-PArg NPs. *PdI*: Polydispersity index. Values are  
 391 given as mean  $\pm$  *sem* ( $n \geq 3$ ).

	Mass ratio [HA/PArg]	Mole ratio [HA/PArg]	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	Zeta potential (mV)
Blank A	0.50: 0.27	0.82	112 $\pm$ 6	< 0.2	+ 33 $\pm$ 5

Blank B	0.75: 0.27	1.24	129 ± 1	< 0.2	+ 32 ± 3
Blank C	1.25: 0.27	2.06	166 ± 7	< 0.2	- 31 ± 1
Blank D	1.5: 0.27	2.47	158 ± 4	< 0.2	- 38 ± 2
Blank E	2.0: 0.27	3.30	167 ± 3	< 0.1	- 33 ± 2
Blank F	2.5: 0.27	4.12	180 ± 14	< 0.1	- 29 ± 3
Blank G	3: 0.27	4.95	201 ± 14	< 0.1	- 31 ± 3
Blank H	3.5: 0.27	5.77	222 ± 11	< 0.2	- 30 ± 4
Blank I	5: 0.27	8.25	244 ± 5	< 0.1	- 22 ± 3

### 3.4. Development and physicochemical characterization of pentamidine-loaded hyaluronic acid-polyarginine nanoparticles

PTM-loaded NPs were prepared following the protocol described for blank NPs. Different concentrations of HA ( $0.83 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$  to  $3.3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ ) were added to an aqueous solution containing PArg ( $0.18 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$ ) and PTM of concentration ranging from 0.5 to  $0.17 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$  (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Preparation of PTM-loaded nanoparticles by polyelectrolyte association.

The physicochemical characterizations of NPs obtained using a PTM solution of  $0.5 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mL}^{-1}$  concentration (Table 4) showed an average size between 155 and 203 nm with a low *PdI* ( $< 0.1$ ) and a negative  $\zeta$  potential ranging from -24 to -18 mV. Interestingly, the incorporation of the drug into NPs caused a reduction of NPs size compared to blank ones (Table 3). The balance between negatively (HA) and positively (PTM and PArg) charged species was reduced in the case of PTM-loaded NPs as compared to the HA-PArg NPs. Therefore, the attractive force that modulates electrostatic interactions within the complexes determined a “condensation phenomenon”

responsible of the reduction of the complex particle size<sup>35,36</sup>. The  $\zeta$  potential decreased from -24 to -26 mV for Loaded A to Loaded F, and then increased to -18 mV for Loaded G. The effect of NPs size reduction has been observed also for other particles suggesting the strong interaction between the drug and the polymeric chains<sup>17,22</sup>.

Since the formation of NPs, the association of PTM to the polymers causes its encapsulation inside the particles. Association efficiency AE is equivalent to the widely used encapsulation efficiency EE.

The amounts of associated PTM varied from AE= 26% (Loaded A) to as high as AE= 82% (Loaded G) upon increasing the HA/PArg mole ratio (Table 4). The highest encapsulation efficiencies were obtained when the amounts of PTM were low, so that high AE (82% for Loaded G) was correlated with low loading capacity (12% for Loaded G). Taking together all these results, PTM was efficiently associated in HA-PArg NPs at a mole ratio above 2.25 and with a loading capacity ranging from 20 to 10%. This data confirms that the addition of PArg to the system had the advantageous effect of promoting the association of PTM to the systems.

**Table 4.** Physicochemical properties of PTM-loaded NPs obtained using a PTM solution at 0.5 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup>. *PdI*: polydispersity index; AE (%): association efficiency. Values are given as mean  $\pm$  *sem* ( $n \geq 3$ ).

	Mass ratio [HA: PArg: PTM]	Mole ratio [HA/PArg +PTM]	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	Zeta potential (mV)	Loading capacity (%)	AE (%)
Loaded A	1.25:0.27:0.75	1.13	155 $\pm$ 3	< 0.1	-24 $\pm$ 3	33	26 $\pm$ 3
Loaded B	1.5:0.27:0.75	1.35	159 $\pm$ 4	< 0.1	-25 $\pm$ 2	30	31 $\pm$ 4
Loaded C	2:0.27:0.75	1.80	191 $\pm$ 20	< 0.1	-27 $\pm$ 2	25	46 $\pm$ 5
Loaded D	2.5:0.27:0.75	2.25	157 $\pm$ 6	< 0.1	-25 $\pm$ 5	21	61 $\pm$ 5
Loaded E	3:0.27:0.75	2.70	172 $\pm$ 14	< 0.1	-29 $\pm$ 4	19	65 $\pm$ 1
Loaded F	3.5:0.27:0.75	3.15	179 $\pm$ 4	< 0.1	-26 $\pm$ 1	17	76 $\pm$ 1
Loaded G	5:0.27:0.75	4.51	203 $\pm$ 9	< 0.1	-18 $\pm$ 1	12	82 $\pm$ 1

427 The fraction of associated PTM increased as a function of the concentration of HA (from Loaded A  
428 to Loaded G). The highest PTM binding efficiency was obtained for the formulation Loaded F  
429 containing  $2.3 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$  of HA and Loaded G containing  $3.3 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$  of HA. These results  
430 confirmed the ability of NPs to associate a high quantity of PTM by electrostatic interaction. Then,  
431 Loaded F and Loaded G were selected for the *in vitro* studies. Previous papers reported the different  
432 nanosystems for PTM encapsulation. Encapsulation of PTM inside liposome yielded an association  
433 efficiency below 50% due to the hydrophilic character of PTM<sup>37</sup>. PTM has also been encapsulated  
434 into other types polymeric NPs such as PLGA NPs. As described for the liposome formulation, the  
435 loading efficiency of PTM was very low (around 2.9%)<sup>24</sup>.  
436 Micale et al. developed PTM-HA bioconjugates in which drug loading ranged from 20 to 30%.  
437 However, the use of chemical reactions and organic solvents compromised the direct exploitation of  
438 the conjugate for drug delivery applications<sup>35</sup>.

439

### 440 **3.5. Quantification of isethionate ions using ion-exchange chromatography**

441 According to electrostatic binding of counterions to polyelectrolytes in solution, the ion  
442 concentration in the counterion cloud that surrounds the charged molecules is significantly higher  
443 than that in the solution, especially at low ionic strength. Formation of an electrostatic complex of  
444 PTM with HA weakens electrostatic binding of isethionate counterions to PTM, so, isethionate  
445 counterions are released in bulk solution. The balance is a competitive binding of HA and  
446 isethionate to PTM which is shifted towards HA because of its large negative charge (it is a  
447 polyelectrolyte) compared to the monovalent isethionate anion. In case of full ion exchange of HA  
448 for isethionate, the overall charge of the particles varies as the PTM/HA mole ratio. In the absence  
449 of ion exchange (adsorption of the neutral PTM-isethionate ion pair), loading PTM does not change  
450 electrostatic phenomena with respect to blank NPs. The balance of isethionate binding to NPs  
451 controls the NPs charge, thus the onset of NPs formation. When two opposite charged macro-ions  
452 form a complex, as in the case of HA with PTM and PArg, the electrical double layer is perturbed

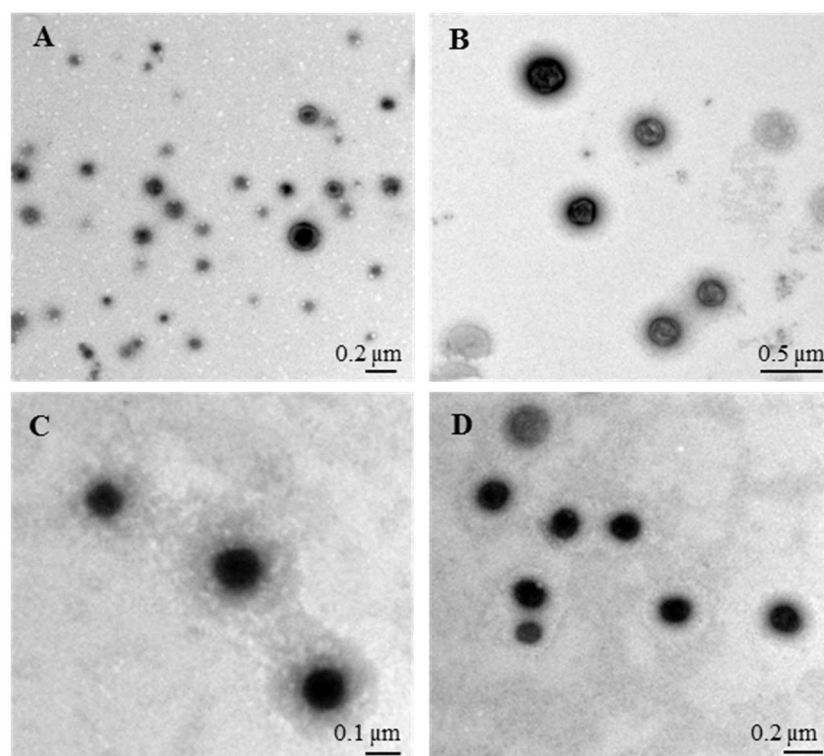
453 and counterions are released to the bulk solution<sup>38</sup>. To assess the influence of HA concentration on  
454 the formation of PTM-loaded NPs (Loaded B, C, D, E and F), the release of isethionate, the  
455 counterion of PTM, was quantified using ion exchange chromatography. The results show that the  
456 full amount of isethionate was released upon formation of all NPs irrespective of the amount of HA.  
457 This shows that electrostatic interactions between HA and PTM are predominant. It should be kept  
458 in mind that association by strong interactions remains an equilibrium that could be shifted  
459 according to changes of external condition (pH, ionic strength).

460

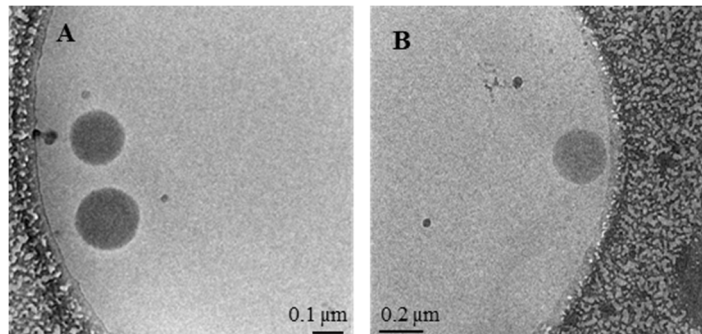
### 461 **3.6. Morphological analysis of blank and pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles**

462 The morphological analysis of HA-PArg NPs (Blank H and I) and PTM-loaded NPs (Loaded F and  
463 G) was carried out using TEM and Cryogenic transmission electron microscopy (CryoTEM). As  
464 shown in Figure 5, HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs formed monodispersed population of  
465 regular rounded-shaped particles as observed by DLS measurements. The addition of the drug did  
466 not modify the morphology of the NPs.

467 Besides, to prepare TEM samples, NPs were stained and dried before the analysis. This preparation  
468 step might modify the structure of the NPs. Observation NPs in their native state was achieved with  
469 Cryo-TEM. Both measurements showed similar results and confirmed the DLS analysis (Figure 6).



**Figure 5.** TEM images of Blank H (A); Blank I (B); Loaded F (C) and Loaded G (D).

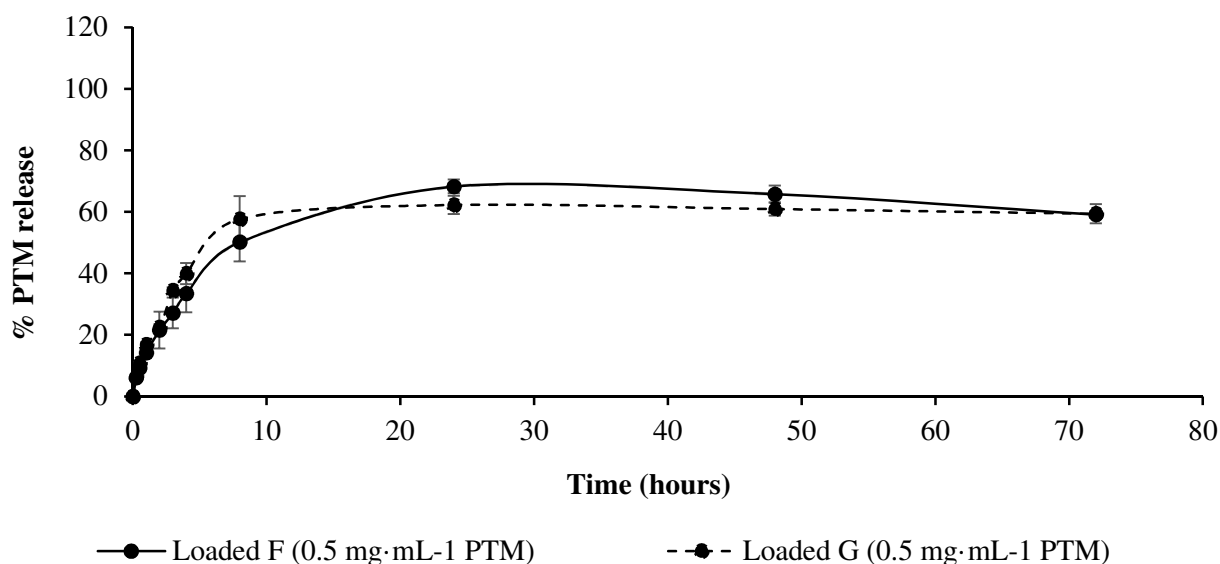


**Figure 6.** Cryo-TEM images of Loaded F with 2.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA (A) and Loaded G with 3.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA (B).

### 3.7. *In vitro* release study of pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

The release study was performed for HA-PArg NPs (loaded F and loaded G) upon incubation with PBS at 37°C using vertical diffusion Franz cells. For both formulations a biphasic release profile characterized by an initial burst release in the first 8 h, 6% of release after 15 min increasing up to

50% after 8 h, was observed. Then, a plateau was reached and no further release was detected until 72 h (Figure 7). This behavior has been described also for others hydrophilic polymer-based NPs<sup>39</sup>. According to the authors, the encapsulation of a hydrophilic drug allows a faster penetration of water in the system causing the swelling of polymeric matrix and the formation of pores. The initial burst release is probably due to a fast erosion of the surface that cause the disaggregation of the polymeric matrix with a fast drug release. When the swelling of the matrix is compensated by erosion process a constant release towards water as receptor medium was observed. Moreover, the release behavior of PTM from NPs was similar to the control PTM solution. This shows that the rate-limiting step of the experiment was the diffusion of PTM through the dialysis membrane.



**Figure 7.** Release profile of PTM from loaded F and loaded G in PBS medium. The diffusion cells were thermoregulated with water at 37°C circulating in a double jacket. (Mean  $\pm$  Sem.; n = 3).

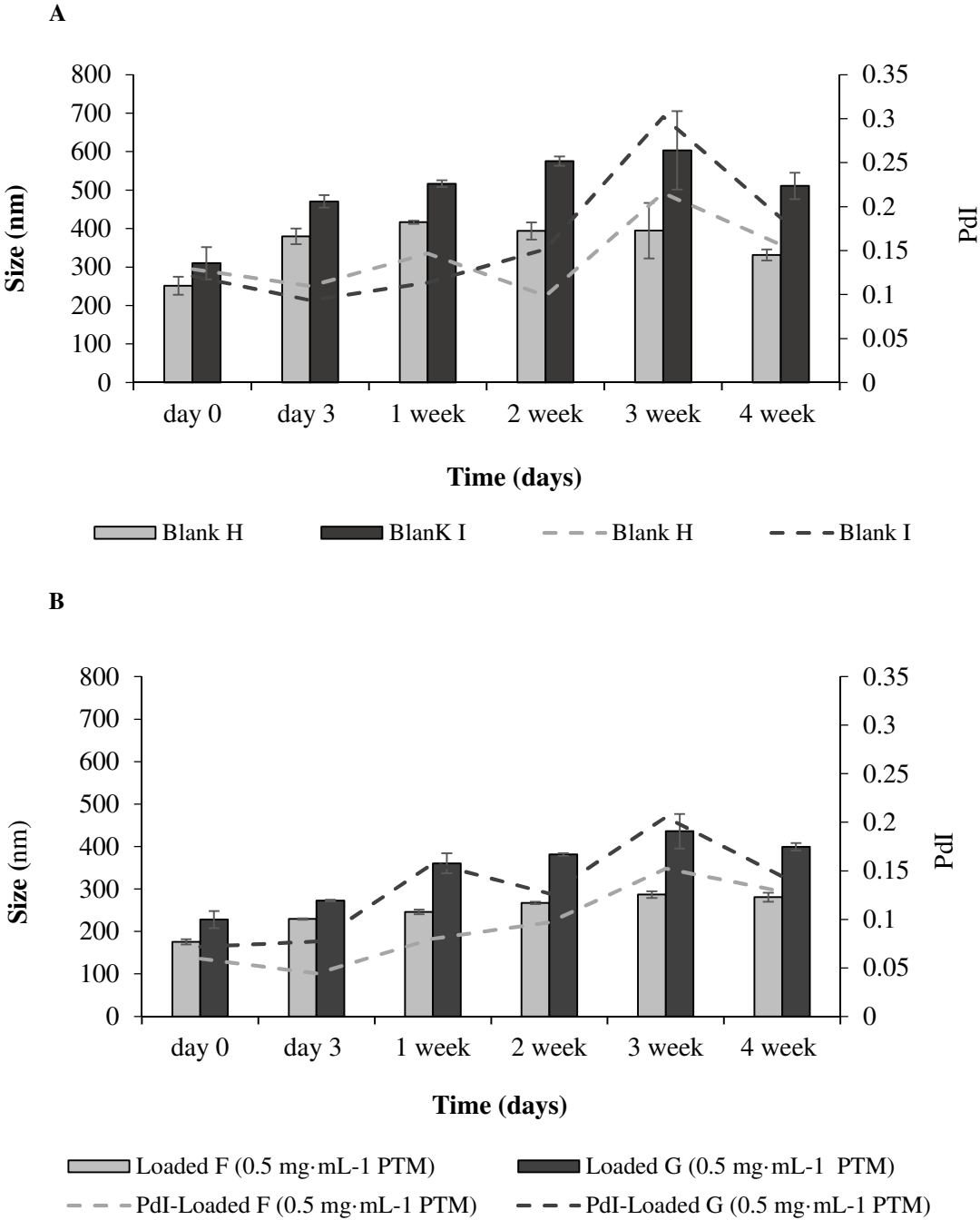
### 3.8. Stability studies of blank and pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

The stability of colloidal suspensions of Blank H and I (Figure 8-A) and Loaded F and G (Figure 8-B) NPs at 4 °C was evaluated over 1 month of storage. Size, polydispersity index and leakage of PTM were evaluated every week. As reported in Figure 8-A and B, size and *PdI* of Blank H and I increased over time for both formulations. However, Blank (H-I) and Loaded NPs (F-G) were more



500 stable cause they were more negative and more stabilized by electrostatic repulsions. No leakage of  
501 the drug was observed for both formulations, demonstrating the ability of NPs to associate PTM in  
502 an efficient manner. In addition, Blank H and PTM-Loaded F did not aggregate in DMEM (data not  
503 shown).

504



505

506

507 **Figure 8.** Stability studies, size and *PdI*, upon storage condition for 4 weeks at 4°C in aqueous  
508 solution of Blank H (3.5 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA), Blank I (5 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA) (A) and Loaded F

(2.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA), Loaded G (3.3 mg·mL<sup>-1</sup> of HA) (B). *PdI*: polydispersity index. (Mean ± *sem*; *n* = 3).

511

### 3.9. Freeze-drying studies of blank and pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

A dry form of blank and loaded NPs selected was prepared by freeze-drying in order to study the long-term stability. The optimal freeze-drying conditions that convert the aqueous suspension into dry powder and allow for reconstitution in physiological medium were set up. Blank H, Blank I, Loaded F and Loaded G were freeze-dried using different amount of mannitol (5%, 10% w/v) as bulking and isotonic agent. The aim was to obtain isotonic values close to physiological condition (280-300 mOsm·L<sup>-1</sup>). Tables 5 and 6 show the physicochemical characteristics (size, *PdI* and osmolality) of Blank H and Loaded F formulations prepared with different mannitol concentrations, before and after redispersion in water. Also, stability after redispersion was evaluated over 15 days at 4 °C. Blank H and Loaded F, were successfully dispersed in water irrespective of the amount of mannitol used. However, 5% mannitol was needed to obtain isotonic formulation. Following reconstitution in water, the size of HA-PArg NPs and PTM-loaded NPs increased. Moreover, the size continued to increase during the storage period for the both formulations (Table 5-6). However, the population remained monodispersed (*PdI* > 0.1) and no leakage of the drug during the time was observed. **Figure 9** confirms that both Blank H and Loaded F recovered the initial morphology characteristics upon freeze-drying and reconstitution in water. Both formulations formed monodispersed population showing a regular round shape and no aggregation was detected.

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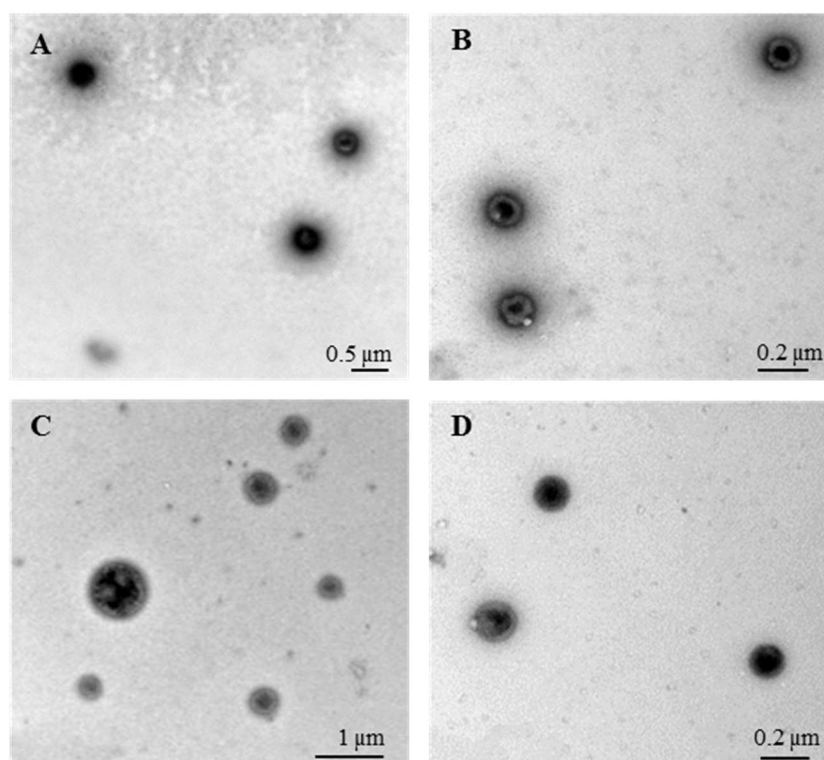
**Table 5.** Physicochemical characterization of Blank H before and after freeze-drying and reconstitution. *PdI*: polydispersity index. Results are expressed as mean values ± *sem*; *n* = 3.

5% mannitol				10% mannitol		
Days	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	Osmol. (mOsm·L <sup>-1</sup> )	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	Osmol. (mOsm·L <sup>-1</sup> )

0	151 ± 5	< 0.1	-	148 ± 6	-	-
0	218 ± 5	< 0.1	665	210 ± 8	< 0.1	305
8	233 ± 7	< 0.1	665	254 ± 11	< 0.2	305
16	315 ± 45	< 0.1	665	383 ± 42	< 0.2	305

**Table 6.** Physicochemical characterization of Loaded F after freeze-drying and reconstitution. *PdI*: polydispersity index. *AE* (%) association efficiency. Results are expressed as mean values ± *sem*; *n* = 3.

5% mannitol					10% mannitol			
Days	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	<i>AE</i> (%)	Osmol. (mOsm·L <sup>-1</sup> )	Size (nm)	<i>PdI</i>	<i>AE</i> (%)	Osmol. (mOsm·L <sup>-1</sup> )
0	149 ± 1	< 0.1	79 ± 1	-	157 ± 6	-	64 ± 2	-
0	234 ± 12	< 0.2	76 ± 1	669	204 ± 12	< 0.1	64 ± 4	297
8	287 ± 13	< 0.1	-	669	265 ± 3	< 0.1	-	297
16	353 ± 6	< 0.1	78 ± 1	669	321 ± 10	< 0.2	75 ± 1	297



**Figure 9.** TEM pictures of Blank H (A-B) and Loaded F (C-D) nanoparticles after freeze-drying and reconstitution in 1 mL of water.

### 3.10. *In vitro* cell viability studies of pentamidine-loaded nanoparticles

The antiproliferative activity of free and encapsulated PTM into Loaded F was assessed using the MTT assay. Lung (A549) and human breast cancer (MDA-MB-231) cell lines were selected based on their sensitivity to PTM<sup>23,40</sup>. The viability of A549 and MDA-MB-231 was monitored after incubation with different concentrations of free PTM and PTM-loaded NPs for 72 h. Blank H were used as controls to evaluate the biocompatibility of the nanocarrier. As shown in Table 7, the use of Loaded F was associated with a better activity than free PTM both on lung ( $IC_{50} = 0.21 \pm 0.08 \mu M$  vs  $1.2 \pm 0.8 \mu M$ ) and breast cancer cells ( $IC_{50} = 2.2 \pm 1.8 \mu M$  vs  $4.6 \pm 3.7 \mu M$ ). Blank I showed very low toxicity ( $IC_{50} > 40 \mu M$ ) highlighting the biocompatibility of the nanocarrier. These data confirmed that PTM activity *in vitro* was improved when the drug was incorporated inside nanoparticles.

As reported in the literature both cell lines express CD44 receptors<sup>41,42</sup>. Hence, we suggest that the present NPs can target cancer cells *in vivo* through interaction with this receptor.

In line with our study, Battistini et al.<sup>16</sup> observed that in A549 cells, cytotoxicity of HA-doxorubicin complexes was 3-fold higher than that of the reference free drug. These results indicated an increased cellular uptake of doxorubicin when complexed with HA due to the presence of CD44 membrane receptors<sup>14</sup>. Targeting CD44 using HA moieties has also been demonstrated *in vivo* in CD44-positive human breast tumor xenografts mice. HA based micelles loaded with paclitaxel exhibit a remarkably high accumulation and retention in the CD44 receptor-overexpressing tumor following intravenous injection in comparison to the free drug<sup>15</sup>.

**Table 7.**  $IC_{50}$  values of studied compounds on A549 and MDA-MB-231 cells. Results are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  *sem*;  $n = 3$ .

Cell line	Formulations	$IC_{50}$ ( $\mu M$ )
	PTM	$1.2 \pm 0.8$

A549	PTM-loaded NPs	$0.21 \pm 0.08$
	Blank HA NPs	$42 \pm 16$
MDA-MB-231	PTM	$4.6 \pm 3.7$
	PTM-loaded NPs	$2.2 \pm 1.8$
	Blank HA NPs	$66 \pm 47$

#### 4. Conclusions

The present study provides insight into a new HA based nano-complex, namely nanoparticles, for encapsulation of positively charged hydrophilic drug. In a first set of experiments, HA-PTM complexes were studied. Such complexes were highly polydispersed species that remained soluble in water. To stabilize the complex and to maximize the amount of the drug associated to the system, HA-PArg NPs were developed using polyelectrolyte complexation technique. NPs were kinetically stabilized by the excess charge, which prevented their aggregation and ensured high encapsulation efficiency of PTM. Also, high encapsulation efficiency was associated to the release of the isethionate counterion in the solution quantified by IC. Following *in vitro* studies, PTM-loaded NPs were more effective in reducing cell viability as compared with free drug suggesting enhanced efficacy and cell internalization via CD44 receptor. Moreover, their optimum pharmaceutical properties, namely easy production using mild conditions, stability and possibility to obtain ready-to-use dry powders, highlight the potential of HA-PArg nanoparticles as novel drug delivery system for nanomedicine applications.

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585

586 **Notes**

587 The authors declare no competing financial interests.

588

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Anionic polymer  
Hyaluronic acid



Cationic polymer  
Polyarginine

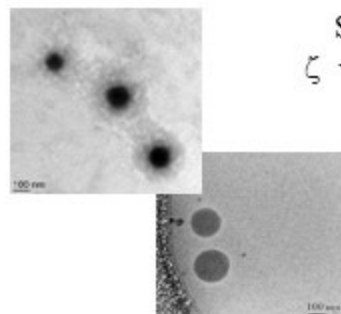


Pentamidine  
isethionate (PTM)



## Physico-chemical characterization

TEM and Cryo-TEM

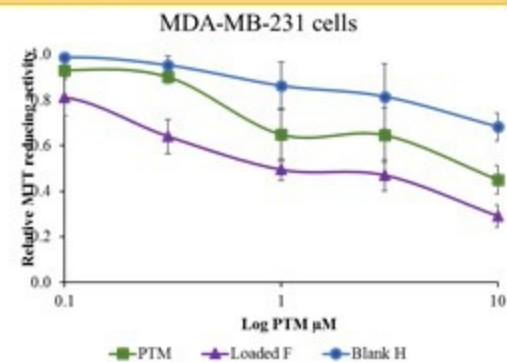
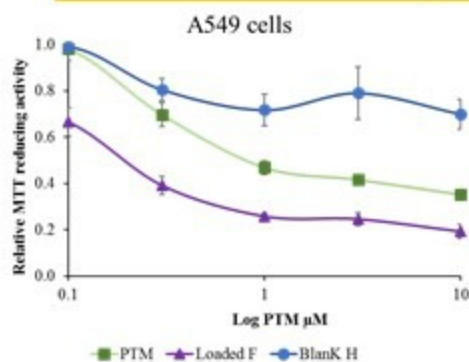


Size from 155 to 203 nm  
 $\zeta$  values from -24 to -18 mV  
Low Pdl (<0.1)

Freeze-drying



## Citotoxicity assay



PTM-loaded NPs induced a significant reduction in cell viability in comparison with PTM solution.