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AFM reveals the interaction and nanoscale effects imposed by squalamine on *Staphylococcus epidermidis*

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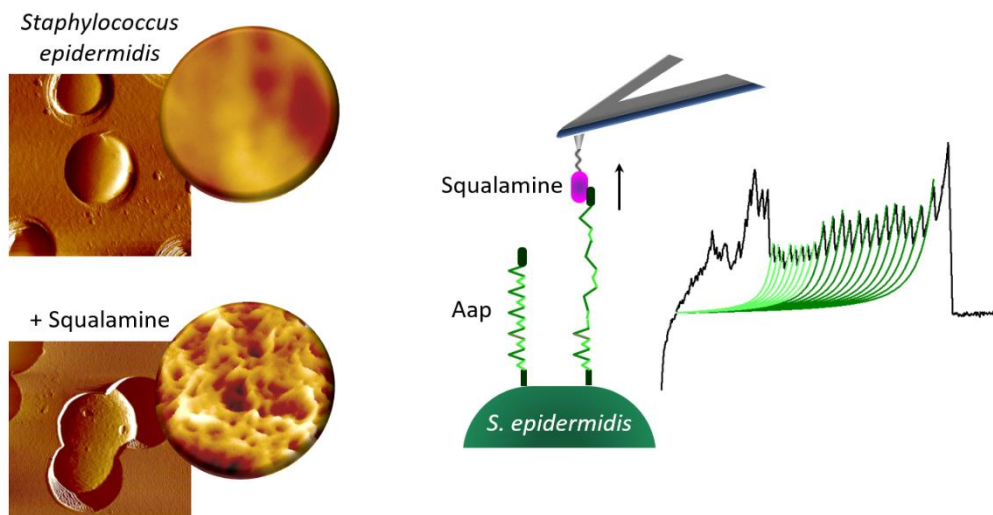
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33 **ABSTRACT**

34 The Gram-positive bacterium *Staphylococcus epidermidis* is responsible for important
35 nosocomial infections. With the continuous emergence of antibiotic-resistant strains, the
36 search for new treatments has been amplified in the last decades. A potential candidate
37 against multidrug-resistant bacteria is squalamine, a natural amino-sterol discovered in
38 dogfish sharks. Despite its broad-spectrum efficiency, little is known about squalamine mode
39 of action. Here, we used atomic force microscopy (AFM) imaging to decipher the effect of
40 squalamine on *S. epidermidis* morphology, revealing the peptidoglycan structure at the
41 bacterial surface after the drug action. Single-molecule force spectroscopy with squalamine-
42 decorated tips shows that squalamine binds to the cell surface *via* the spermidine motif,
43 most likely through electrostatic interactions between the amine groups of the molecule and
44 the negatively-charged bacterial cell wall. We demonstrated that - although spermidine is
45 sufficient for the initial attachment of squalamine to *S. epidermidis* – the integrity of the
46 molecule needs to be conserved for its antimicrobial action. Deeper analysis of the AFM
47 force-distance signatures revealed the implication of the accumulation-associated protein
48 (Aap), one of the main adhesins of *S. epidermidis*, in the initial binding of squalamine to the
49 bacterial cell wall. This work highlights that AFM -combined with microbiological assays at
50 the bacterial suspension scale- is a valuable approach to better understand the molecular
51 mechanisms behind the efficiency of squalamine antibacterial activity.

52

53 **Keywords:** *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, squalamine, atomic force microscopy, interactions,
54 antimicrobial, aminosterol, Aap

55

56 **Introduction**

57 The human skin commensal *Staphylococcus epidermidis* has developed as one of the leading
58 opportunistic pathogens responsible for nosocomial infections. The bacteria gain access to
59 the body mostly by adhering and proliferating on indwelling medical devices [1,2]. The initial
60 adhesion on such abiotic surfaces are mediated by a small collection of surface-associated
61 proteins named adhesins, including the accumulation associated protein Aap [3-6]. Aap is
62 composed of N-terminal repeats followed by a lectin like domain (collectively called the A
63 domain), and a B domain containing 5 to 17 conserved repeats, each of them being made of
64 a 72-amino acids (aa) G5 segment and a 48-aa E segment. The A region has been identified
65 as responsible for the initial binding to host surfaces, whereas the B domain controls
66 intercellular adhesion [3,7].

67 Although *S. epidermidis* contaminations are generally not life-threatening, their frequency
68 and difficulty to be eradicated constitute a major health concern. In addition to their strong
69 ability to colonize medical devices, the complication arises mostly from the existence of
70 specific antibiotic resistance genes that render *S. epidermidis* insensitive to classical
71 treatments such as methicillin, rifamycin, gentamicin or chloramphenicol [8]. In the search of
72 new classes of potential antimicrobials limiting the progress of drug-resistant microbes,
73 membrane-targeting antibiotics have been suggested as promising candidates. Among them,
74 squalamine, a natural aminosterol isolated from dogfish shark has appeared as remarkably
75 attractive due to its broad-spectrum activity and efficiency against multidrug resistant
76 bacteria [9-12]. This membrane-active molecule would disrupt the outer membranes of
77 Gram-negative bacteria in a detergent-like mechanism of action, and would depolarize the
78 bacterial membranes of Gram-positive bacteria [11-13]. Squalamine is composed of a sterol

79 core with a sulfated side chain, a hydrophilic polyamine spermidine moiety bonded to a
80 hydrophobic unit. Due to the low abundance of natural squalamine, many synthetic amino-
81 steroid derivatives have been synthesized and tested, revealing *e.g.*, that the sulfate group
82 has a low influence on their antimicrobial activity [11-13]. The positively-charged amino
83 groups of the drug is likely to bind to the negatively charged lipopolysaccharides (LPS) at the
84 cellular surface of Gram-negative bacteria. However, the initial attachment of squalamine to
85 Gram-positive bacteria, devoid of LPS, remains less understood [9,13].

86 Here, we used a combination of biological assays, fluorescence test and different AFM
87 modalities to decipher the mechanisms of squalamine adhesion to the surface of *S.*
88 *epidermidis* and the subsequent consequence on the cell morphology. Squalamine
89 treatment close to inhibitory concentrations causes increase of cell roughness and appearing
90 of the peptidoglycan structure at the surface of the treated bacteria. Using AFM-based force
91 spectroscopy measurements, we showed that the presence of the positively-charged
92 spermidine group is necessary for the initial attachment of squalamine to the biosurface, but
93 that the motif itself is not sufficient for the antimicrobial action of the molecule. We also
94 demonstrated that the adhesin Aap is involved in the primarily attachment of the drug to the
95 bacterial cell wall.

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101 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

102 **Microorganisms and Culture Media**

103 The American Type Culture Collection (ATCC) *S. epidermidis* strain (ATCC-14990) was
104 purchased from LGC Standards, Molsheim, France and used for the *in vitro* antibacterial
105 evaluation and AFM experiments. Mueller-Hinton Cation-Adjusted Agar (MHA-CA, Becton
106 Dickinson) and Broth (MHB-CA, Becton Dickinson) were used for bacterial growth and
107 antimicrobial assays. Bacteria were grown at 35°C for 18 hours.

108 Squalamine was kindly provided by Dr. JM Brunel (Aix Marseille Université, INSERM, SSA,
109 MCT, Marseille, France). Stock solutions were prepared in sterile water. The stock solution
110 was subsequently diluted for use as a working solution.

111 **Antibacterial Assay**

112 The minimum inhibitory concentrations (MIC) values of the molecules were determined
113 using the microdilution technique according to the NF EN ISO 20776-1 guidelines (ISO 20776-
114 1:2019). Susceptibility testing of infectious agents and evaluation of performance of
115 antimicrobial susceptibility test devices — Part 1: Broth micro-dilution reference method for
116 testing the *in vitro* activity of antimicrobial agents against rapidly growing aerobic bacteria
117 involved in infectious diseases). In brief, 50 µL of water-diluted Squalamine at 128 µM were
118 added to an equal volume of MHB-CA. Initially, 50 µL of this solution were serially diluted in
119 50 µL MHB-CA. Then, 50 µL of bacteria at 10⁶ colony forming units per mL (CFU/mL) were
120 added. Final molecule concentration was ranging from 0.1 to 32 µM. The final inoculum was
121 5.10⁵ CFU/mL and was checked according to ISO guidelines. MIC was determined as the
122 lowest concentration with no visible bacterial growth after an 18 h incubation at 35°C. Each
123 test consists in 8 repetitions. When MIC was obtained, a minimal bactericidal concentration

124 (MBC) test was performed. Cells were plated with product at MIC, double MIC, four MIC;
125 and incubated overnight at 35°C on Mueller Hinton Agar (BD, 225250, New York, US). The
126 same approach was used in the determination of MIC and MBC of spermidine.

127 **Cytotoxicity evaluation**

128 The cytotoxicity of squalamine was determined using the MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-
129 2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide) colorimetric assay, as previously described [14]. The effect
130 of the molecule on the viability of normal human lung fibroblasts MRC-5 (MRC-5, ATCC® CCL-
131 171TM, Public Health England, Salisbury, England) cells was thus determined. The cells were
132 cultured in Minimal Essential Medium (MEM, M4655, Sigma-Aldrich, France) supplemented
133 with 2% fetal calf serum (CVFSV F00-0U, Eurobio, France). The treated cells were incubated
134 at 37°C in 5% CO₂ atmosphere for 72 h. The absorbance of the solution was measured at 540
135 nm. The absorbance values were proportional to the surviving cells and the cytotoxic
136 concentration (CC) for Squalamine was calculated to be 10 µM, allowing the survival of more
137 than 50% of the host cells. The MIC values of Squalamine against *S. epidermidis* and the CC
138 values of the compound against the MRC-5 cells were used to determine the selectivity
139 index (SI) for the molecule using the following formula: $SI = CC / MIC$.

140

141 **Atomic force microscopy measurements.**

142 AFM measurements were performed at room temperature in Tris buffer (Tris 100mM 150mM
143 NaCl pH=7.4) using a Fastscan dimension Icon with Nanoscope V controller (Bruker) and a
144 Bioscope Resolve AFM (Bruker corporation, Santa Barbara, CA). Bacteria from the cell
145 suspension prepared as detailed above were centrifuged (2 min, 2000 rpm) and resuspended
146 in Tris buffer twice, and then filtered through a polycarbonate porous membrane (Millipore,

147 Billerica, MA, pore size: 1.2 μm) with pore size similar to the cell diameter. The filter was
148 gently rinsed with the buffer, carefully cut ($\sim 1\text{ cm} \times 1\text{ cm}$), attached to a steel sample puck
149 using a small piece of double-sided adhesive tape and mounted into the AFM liquid cell
150 without de-wetting. Images were acquired in Peak Force Tapping mode using NPG silicon
151 nitride tips (Bruker), with a peak force frequency of 2 kHz, a peak force amplitude of 150 nm,
152 a scan rate of 2 Hz and a setpoint of 1 nN. RMS (root mean square) values were determined
153 using Nanoscope analysis software (Bruker; Rq values on 300 nm x 300 nm images after
154 second order flattening). For squalamine-treated cells, bacteria were grown overnight in
155 Muller-Hinton broth as described above, rinsed twice in Tris buffer, and resuspended in
156 Muller-Hinton broth at OD= 1. Squalamine was then added at the desired concentration (*i.e.*
157 1 μM for 0.5XMIC; 2 μM for MIC; 4 μM for 2XMIC) and cells were then cultivated for 12 hours in
158 the conditions described above.

159 Prior to each force spectroscopy measurement, a calibration was performed on a rigid
160 substratum in order to determine the deflection sensitivity (nm/V) of the AFM tip. In turn,
161 this leads to the accurate evaluation of the cantilever spring constant following thermal
162 noise method. For single-molecule force spectroscopy experiments, AFM tips were
163 functionalized with squalamine or spermidine by covalent grafting using N-
164 hydroxysuccinimide (NHS)/ 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-carbodiimide (EDC)
165 chemistry. For that purpose, gold-coated AFM tips (NPG, Bruker) were cleaned in UV-ozone
166 incubator for 10 minutes, rinsed with ethanol, and immersed overnight in a 1 mM 16-
167 mercaptohexadecanoic acid thiols (Sigma) diluted in ethanol, rinsed with ethanol and dry
168 with nitrogen. They were then immersed in 4 mL of ultrapure water containing 40 mg of NHS
169 (Sigma) and 100 mg of EDC (Sigma). After 30 min, tips were rinsed in ultrapure water and
170 immersed in the squalamine or spermidine suspension at 0.2 mg/mL for 1 hour, rinsed and

171 stored in Tris buffer until use. Hydrophobic tips were obtained by immersing clean gold-
172 coated tips overnight in a 1 mM 1-dodecanehiol (Sigma) diluted in ethanol, rinsed with
173 ethanol and dry with nitrogen.

174 All force spectroscopy experiments were performed in Tris buffer. Adhesion maps were
175 obtained by recording 32 x 32 force -distance curves on 500 nm x 500 nm area at the
176 bacterial surface, with a maximum applied force of 250 pN and a constant approach and
177 retraction tip speed of 1 $\mu\text{m s}^{-1}$. Adhesion maps were reconstructed by calculating the
178 adhesion force of the last peak of each force curve and displaying the value as a colour/grey
179 pixel.

180

181 **Results and discussion**

182 **Squalamine has antimicrobial and bactericidal effects**

183 We first determined the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of squalamine on *S.*
184 *epidermidis*. For that purpose, we tested the antimicrobial activity of 9 different
185 concentrations of squalamine, ranging from 32 to 0.1 μM , and determined the MIC as the
186 minimum concentration of squalamine where no bacterial growth was observed. As shown on
187 Fig. 1B and Fig. 1 SI, the MIC was obtained for a squalamine concentration of 2 μM .

188 The cytotoxic concentration (CC) for squalamine allowing the survival of more than 50 % of
189 the MRC-5 cells was 10 μM . The results show that squalamine has a selectivity index (SI)
190 value ($\text{SI} = \text{CC}/\text{MIC}$) of 5 for *S. epidermidis* (Fig. 1 SI). A selectivity index value greater than 1
191 indicates that the compound is more toxic to the pathogenic bacteria than to human cells.

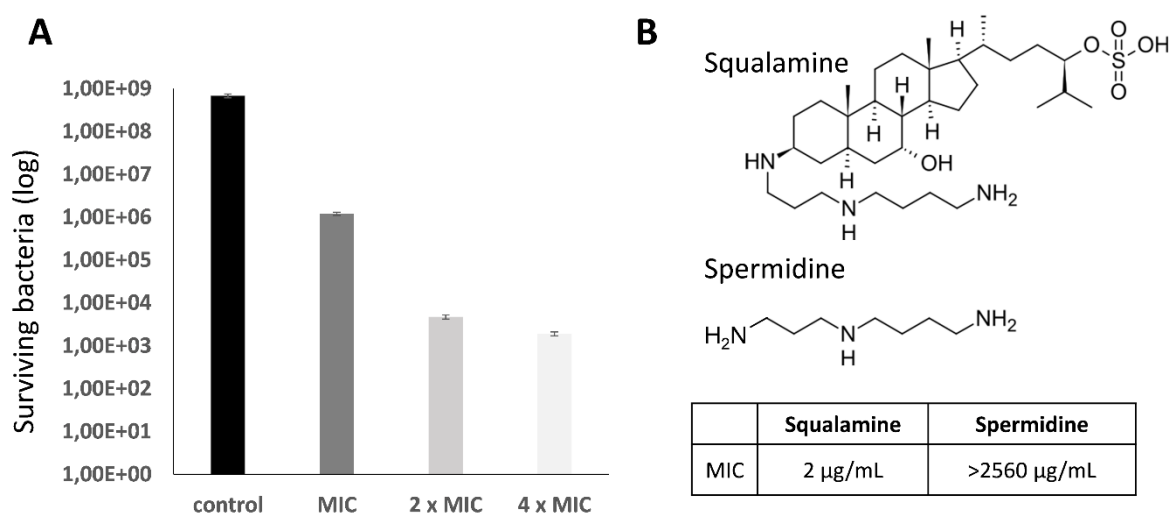
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196 To determine whether squalamine has a bactericidal action, we also performed bactericidal
197 assays. Bacteria were first incubated for 18 hours with the drug at 0, 1, 2 and 4 times the
198 MIC concentration and then 100 μ L were plated on agar plates following serial dilutions from
199 10^{-1} to 10^{-7} (Fig. 2A SI). The bactericidal effect was estimated by comparing the number of
200 colonies forming units (CFU, ~~i.e. viable cells~~) to the initial inoculum (5×10^6 CFU/mL).
201 Bactericidal activity was defined as a reduction of at least 3 \log_{10} ($\geq 99,9\%$) of the total
202 CFU/mL in the original inoculum. For all tested squalamine concentrations, a decrease of
203 viable cells (CFU) was observed and no cells were detected at dilutions 10^{-4} , 10^{-3} and 10^{-2} for
204 squalamine at MIC, 2 MIC and 4 MIC, respectively (Fig. 2B SI). The absence of growth on
205 culture media without drug after the drug exposure in liquid for 18h document on the
206 bactericidal effect of squalamine on *S. epidermidis*. We observe a decrease of the bacterial



207 load close to 3 \log_{10} which clearly indicates a bactericidal activity (Fig. 2A). On the opposite,
208 there was no MIC or bactericidal effect on *S. epidermidis* for the spermidine at the maximal
209 tested concentration of 2560 μ g/mL (MIC >2560 μ g/ mL, Fig. 1B).

210 **Figure 1. Bactericidal assay for the squalamine and chemical structures of the molecules used in this study.**
211 (A) Panel showing the progressive loss of viability (%) of squalamine-treated *S. epidermidis* at MIC, 2 x MIC and
212 4 x MIC (grey bars), respectively. The untreated growth control (black bar) exhibited the expected uninhibited
213 growth. (B) Chemical structure of squalamine and spermidine together with the values of MIC determined for
214 the two molecules.

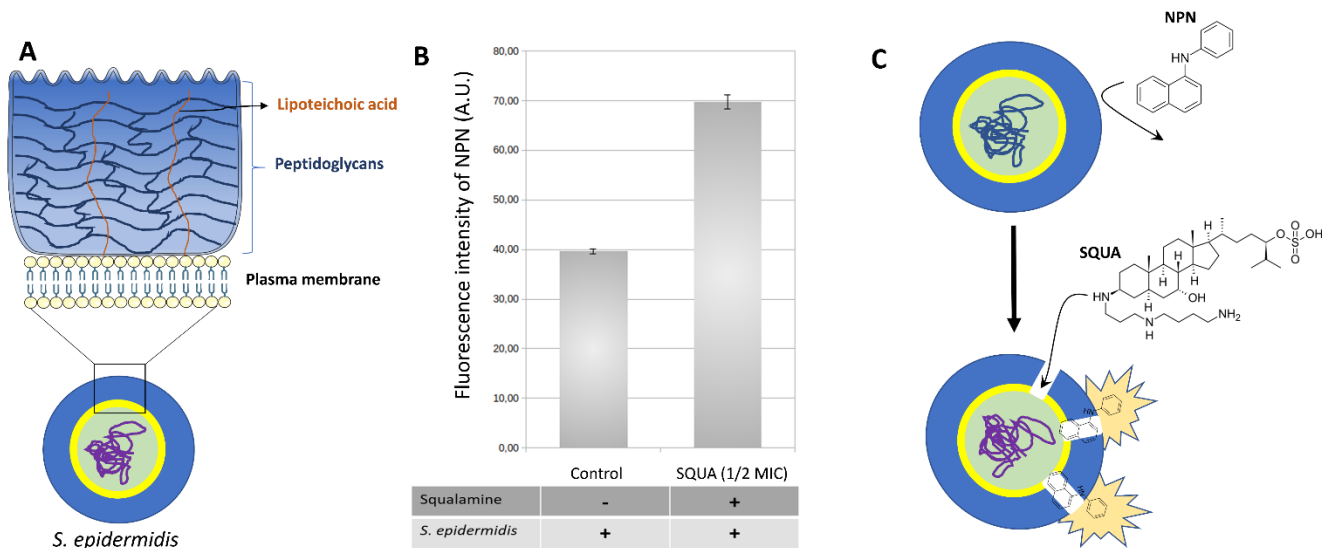
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216 **Squalamine affects *S. epidermidis* peptidoglycan structure and compromise its**
217 **permeability.**

218 The action of squalamine on Gram-negative bacteria has been well-described as binding to
219 the LPS and further disrupting the membrane of the cells due to a detergent-like effect and
220 micellization [15]. Very recently, Boes *et al.* have also discovered another function where
221 squalamine would inhibit the activity of enzymes involved in the peptidoglycan synthesis of
222 *Escherichia coli* [16]. On the other hand, very few studies relate the squalamine mechanisms
223 of action on Gram-positive bacteria. By using a combination of ATP release measurements,
224 TEM and fluorescence assays, Alhanout *et al.* in 2010 have reported a strong depolarization
225 of the membrane of *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Streptococcus pneumoniae* [13]. However, to
226 our knowledge, no further mechanisms have been described on Gram-positive bacteria.

227 To better understand the effect of squalamine on *S. epidermidis* at the bacterial suspension
228 scale, permeability assay has been performed using N-phenyl-1-naphthylamine (NPN), a dye
229 which becomes fluorescent in hydrophobic environments such as membranes (Fig. 2). As
230 seen in Fig. 2B, the fluorescence level before treatment was low, meaning that the dye had
231 no access to the membrane because of peptidoglycan (PG) low permeability. After culturing
232 the bacteria with a sub-lethal concentration of squalamine, the fluorescence intensity of
233 NPN became significantly increased documenting that the drug permeabilised *S. epidermidis*
234 cell wall most likely by de-structuring the peptidoglycan (Fig. 2B, C).

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239 **Figure 2. Methodology used to determine interactions of Squalamine (SQUA) with *S. epidermidis* membranes**
 240 **using N-phenyl-1-naphthylamine (NPN) permeability assay. The fluorescent NPN dye can be used to monitor**
 241 **the integrity of the bacterial membrane.** (A) Schematic representation of the essential elements of the
 242 structure of the Gram-positive cocci *S. epidermidis*, with inner plasma membrane (yellow), peptidoglycan layer
 243 (blue) with lipoteichoic acid (orange) and peptidoglycans (dark blue), intracellular content (green) and nucleic
 244 acids (purple). (B) Graph showing fluorescence measurement before and after addition of Squalamine in *S.*
 245 *epidermidis* culture. *S. epidermidis* was exposed to SQUA at 0.5 MIC (1 μ M), and the permeability of the
 246 bacterial membrane was monitored by measuring the fluorescence of NPN. Fluorescence values were
 247 compared to untreated bacteria, in a media control. Panel I of the graph shows the fluorescence level of
 248 control bacteria without damaged membrane (Control). Panel II indicates possible partial permeabilization of
 249 bacterial membrane by SQUA, resulting in an increase of fluorescence readings after addition of NPN. (C)
 250 Illustration of a model of how SQUA could affect the permeability of the membrane in *S. epidermidis*. The
 251 fluorescent dye NPN before (top) and after (bottom) treatment of *S. epidermidis* with SQUA. NPN becomes
 252 fluorescent when in hydrophobic environment such as membranes, after an induced damage. A sub-lethal
 253 concentration of SQUA makes the membrane of *S. epidermidis* more permeable. NPN is excluded from
 254 untreated bacteria but penetrates into *S. epidermidis* with a compromised cell wall where it binds, resulting in
 255 increased fluorescence.

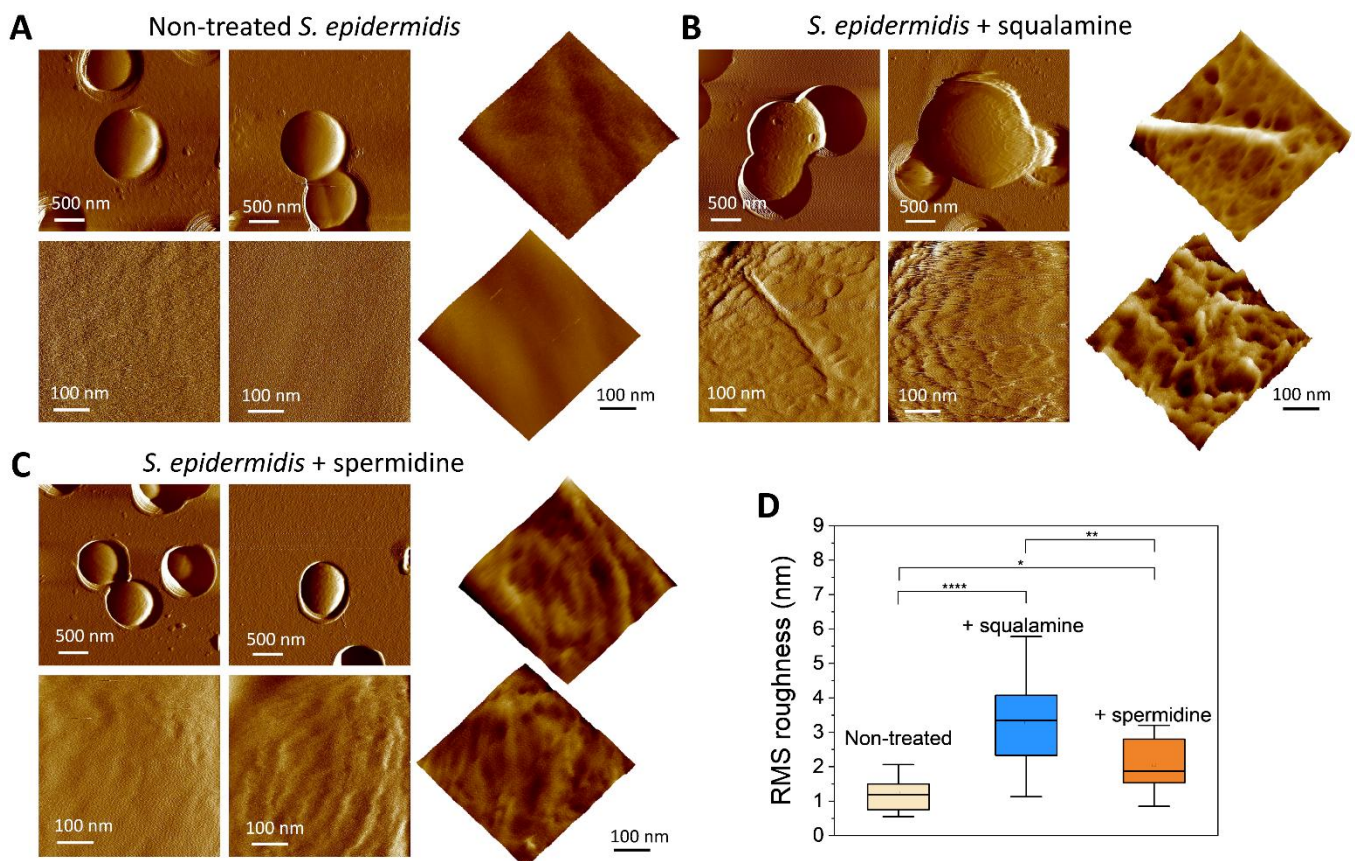
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258 We then used AFM to get a closer look to the squalamine effect on the bacterial cell wall at
 259 the cellular scale. AFM images of *S. epidermidis* before and after treatment with squalamine
 260 at twice the MIC for 12 h are depicted on Fig. 3. Without drug treatment, individual cells
 261 images obtained in buffer appeared round and homogeneous (Fig. 3A). Images acquired at

262 higher magnification and roughness analysis indicate that the bacterial surface is smooth
 263 (rms roughness = 1.2 ± 0.5 nm).

264
 265



266 At 2x MIC of squalamine, some bacteria presented abnormal bigger size as compared to the
 267 non-treated cells (1445 ± 219 nm for squalamine-treated cells vs 929 ± 70 nm for non-
 268 treated cells) and all cells displayed some bumps and holes at their surface (Fig. 3B),
 269 increasing the average roughness to 3.3 ± 1.3 nm.

270

271 **Figure 3. AFM images of native, squalamine- and spermidine-treated *S. epidermidis* cells.** (A-D) Low (top) and
 272 high (bottom) magnification deflection images in 2D (left) and 3D (right) of *S. epidermidis* acquired in buffer
 273 solution for non-treated cells (A), and cells cultured overnight with $4 \mu\text{M}$ of squalamine (B) and $4 \mu\text{M}$ of
 274 spermidine (C). (D) Classical whisker representation of the root mean square (RMS) roughness extracted from
 275 AFM images, for which the bottom and the top of the box are the 25th and the 75th percentiles. The black
 276 band in the box corresponds to the median. Data in panel D stem from measurements conducted at least on 11
 277 different bacteria (probed cell surface area $500 \times 500 \text{ nm}^2$). Statistical analysis using Welch's Anova test (*: $p <$
 278 0.05 , **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$, ****: $p < 0.0001$), resulting in p values of < 0.0001 for native vs squalamine-

279 treated cells, 0.0118 for native vs spermidine-treated cells, and 0.0045 for squalamine- vs spermidine-treated
280 cells.

281 Closer inspection of the morphology of the treated bacteria revealed a tight disorder mesh
282 composed of pores, recalling that of peptidoglycan mature *S. aureus* cells [17], even more
283 visible in the 3D representation of the images (Fig. 3B). We thus hypothesis that squalamine
284 might i) have a direct impact by abrading the cell wall biomolecules, bringing out the PG
285 structure and/or ii) act intracellularly by modifying PG synthesis pathway – as it has been
286 reported for Gram-negative bacteria.[16] However, this hypothesis was not chemically
287 confirmed.

288 Performing the same AFM image analysis on *S. epidermidis* treated with an equivalent
289 concentration in spermidine (conc= 4 μ M; Fig. 3C) showed that spermidine has only little
290 influence on the bacteria shape and surface roughness (rms = 2.1 ± 0.7 nm), confirming that
291 the integrity of the squalamine molecule needs to be conserved for its antimicrobial effect.

292

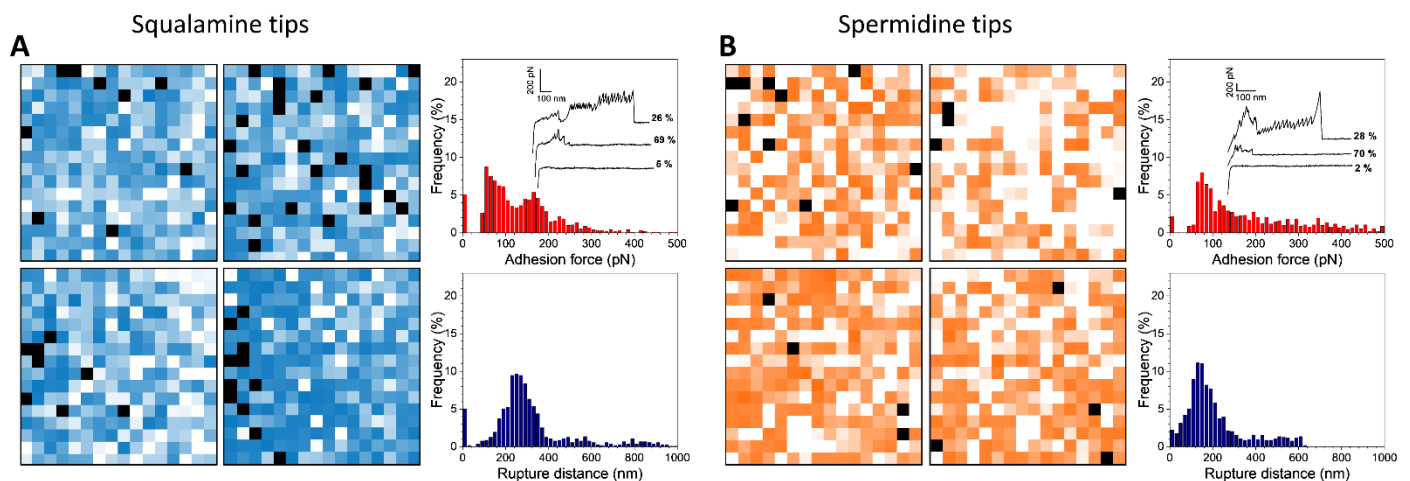
293 **Squalamine binds to *S. epidermidis* surface via its spermidine segment.**

294 We then used single-molecule force spectroscopy (SMFS) to decipher squalamine adhesion
295 mechanisms and address the following question: by which segment of the molecule is
296 squalamine binding to the bacterial surface?

297 For that, AFM tips were first decorated with squalamine using a covalent linking chemistry.
298 Fig. 4A display adhesion maps obtained on 4 different bacteria using 4 independent tips,
299 together with the adhesion and rupture length histograms obtained from the 4096-
300 individual force-distance curves pooled from the 4 experiments. The majority of the force-
301 distance curves (95 %) showed adhesion signatures, with adhesion force ranging from 50 to
302 300 pN and rupturing around 300 nm. Interestingly, two types of force profiles could be

303 observed, as depicted on representative curves on Fig. 4A: low adhesion force profile with
 304 single or very few irregular peaks at small adhesion force and short rupture length (69 % of
 305 the total force curves), whereas 26 % of the force-distance curves display very distinct
 306 sawtooth patterns. A detailed analysis of the origin of these peculiar profiles is described in
 307 the next paragraph.

308 Interestingly, almost the same results were obtained when decorating the AFM tips with
 309 only the spermidine segment, resulting in a total of 98 % adhesive force-distance curves with
 310 70 % of single/small adhesion and 28 % of sawtooth pattern curves (Fig. 4B).



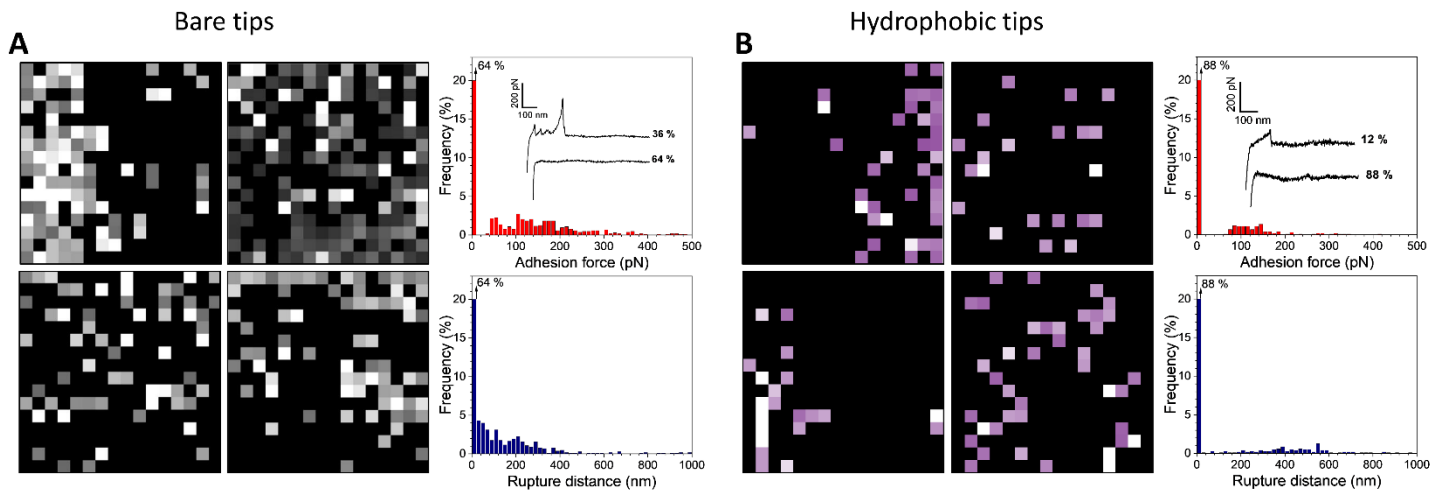
311 **Figure 4. Squalamine adheres to *S. epidermidis* surface via the spermidine motif.** (A; B) Adhesion force maps
 312 ($250 \times 250 \text{ nm}^2$, black and colored pixels correspond to adhesion forces smaller and larger than 50 pN,
 313 respectively. Brighter colors mean larger adhesion; color scale: 250 pN) recorded in buffer between the surface
 314 of *S. epidermidis* cells and AFM tips functionalized with squalamine (A) and spermidine (B). The 4 maps
 315 correspond to 4 different AFM tips adhering on 4 bacteria from independent cultures. The histograms
 316 correspond to the frequency of adhesion force (top) and rupture distances (bottom) constructed from 1024
 317 force-distance curves pooled from data from the 4 depicted maps, together with representative force-distance
 318 curves and their frequency of appearance.

319

320 At the opposite, using bare tips (Fig. 5A) or hydrophobic tips (Fig. 5B) result in a very poor
 321 adhesion frequency where multipeak signatures were never observed. Altogether, our SMFS
 322 results indicate that squalamine adheres strongly and homogeneously at the surface of *S.*
 323 *epidermidis* via the spermidine motif, most likely via electrostatic interaction between the

324 positively-charged amine group of spermidine and the negatively-charged bacterial surface,
 325 and that the function of the hydrophobic sterol-group is not related to surface attachment.

326



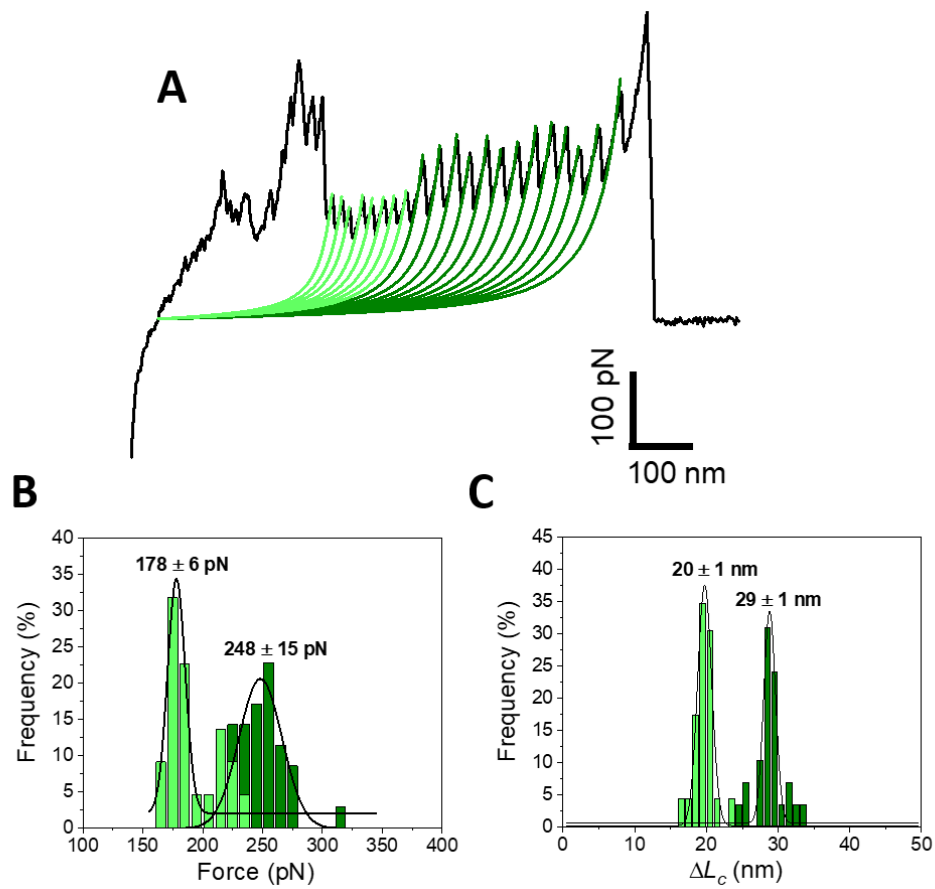
327 **Figure 5. The hydrophobic part of squalamine do not play a role in the initial adhesion to the biosurface.** (A;
 328 B) Adhesion force maps (250 × 250 nm², black and colored pixels correspond to adhesion forces smaller and
 329 larger than 50 pN, respectively. Brighter colors mean larger adhesion; color scale: 250 pN) recorded in buffer
 330 between the surface of *S. epidermidis* cells and AFM bare tips as received from the supplier (A) and AFM tips
 331 decorated with hydrophobic-thiols (B). The 4 maps correspond to 4 different AFM tips adhering on 4 bacteria
 332 from independent cultures. The histograms correspond to the frequency of adhesion force (top) and rupture
 333 distances (bottom) constructed from 1024 force-distance curves pooled from data from the 4 depicted maps,
 334 together with representative force-distance curves and their frequency of appearance.

335

336 **The *S. epidermidis* adhesin Aap is involved in the adhesion of squalamine to the bacteria.**

337 As mentioned above, about one quarter of the force-distance curves recorded between
 338 squalamine- or sperdimine-decorated tips and the surface of *S. epidermidis* display very
 339 regular sawtooth patterns (Fig. 4, Fig 6A). These patterns are reminiscent of that described
 340 when stretching the adhesin SasG at the surface of *Staphylococcus aureus* [18] and Aap at
 341 the surface of *S. epidermidis* [19], *i.e.* being composed of a series of low force peaks (178 ± 6
 342 pN) followed by series of high force peaks (248 ± 15 pN) (Fig. 6B). Fitting the peaks with the
 343 worm-like-chain (WLC) model allows to extract the length of the extended molecule,[20] so-
 344 called the contour length L_c . Statistical analysis of the increase of contour length ΔL_c revealed

345 an increment of 20 ± 1 nm for the low-force peaks and of 29 ± 1 nm for the high-force peaks
346 (Fig. 6C), in full agreement with the number of aa constituting the E and G5 domains of the
347 Aap



348 protein, *i.e.* 48 aa and 72 aa respectively, assuming that each aa contributes 0.4 nm (48×0.4
349 = 19.2 nm and $72 \times 0.4 = 28.8$ nm).

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360 **Figure 6. Squalamine binding to *S. epidermidis* leads to the unfolding of Aap proteins.** (A) Representative
361 force-distance curve displaying sawtooth patterns (black), where each peak can be fitted by the Worm-like
362 chain (WLC) model (green curves). (B, C) Unfolding force (B) and increase of contour length ΔL_c (C) of the peaks
363 for the sawtooth-pattern curves display bimodal distribution, corresponding to the E domains (light green) and
364 G5 domains (dark green) of the Aap protein at the surface of *S. epidermidis*.

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371 **Conclusions**

372 Squalamine is among a new class of antibiotics of animal origin which has been reported as
373 being efficient against multi-resistant bacteria. Although this natural product offers exciting
374 perspectives, its mechanisms of action are not fully elucidated yet. Here, we used biological
375 assays combined to the AFM multifunctional platform to better understand how squalamine
376 binds to and affects the cell wall of the nosocomial pathogenic *S. epidermidis*. We revealed
377 that the accumulation-associated protein (Aap) at the surface of *S. epidermidis* is involved in
378 the initial binding of squalamine to the bacterial cell wall, *via* the spermidine motif of the
379 drug.

380 This study contributes to elucidate how squalamine acts on individual bacteria, which is a
381 necessary step to go deeper in the understanding of the remarkable efficiency and multi-
382 faceted properties of squalamine as antimicrobial agent.

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398 **Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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