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Paper:

Warrilow, A., Parker, J., Price, C., Nes, W., Garvey, E., Hoekstra, W., Schotzinger, R., Kelly, D. & Kelly, S. (2016). The Investigational Drug VT-1129 Is a Highly Potent Inhibitor of Cryptococcus Species CYP51 but Only Weakly Inhibits the Human Enzyme. *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy*, 60(8), 4530-4538.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AAC.00349-16>

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1 **The Investigational Drug VT-1129 is a Highly Potent Inhibitor**
2 **of *Cryptococcus* species CYP51 but only Weakly Inhibits the**
3 **Human Enzyme.**

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13
14 **Running title:** VT-1129 and cryptococcal CYP51s.

15 **Keywords:** CYP51, VT-1129, *Cryptococcus*, azole antifungal.

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23 **Cryptococcosis is a life-threatening disease often associated with HIV infection.**
24 **Three *Cryptococcus* species CYP51 enzymes were purified and catalyzed the 14 α -**
25 **demethylation of lanosterol, eburicol and obtusifoliol. The investigational agent**
26 **VT-1129 bound tightly to all three CYP51 proteins (dissociation constant [K_d]**
27 **range, 14 to 25 nM) with affinities similar to those of fluconazole, voriconazole,**
28 **itraconazole, clotrimazole, and ketoconazole (K_d range, 4 to 52 nM), whereas VT-**
29 **1129 bound weakly to human CYP51 (K_d , 4.53 μ M). VT-1129 was as effective as**
30 **conventional triazole antifungal drugs at inhibiting cryptococcal CYP51 activity**
31 **(50% inhibitory concentration [IC_{50}] range, 0.14 to 0.20 μ M), while it only weakly**
32 **inhibited human CYP51 activity (IC_{50} , ~600 μ M). Furthermore, VT-1129 weakly**
33 **inhibited human CYP2C9, CYP2C19, and CYP3A4, suggesting a low drug-drug**
34 **interaction potential. Finally, the cellular mode of action for VT-1129 was**
35 **confirmed to be CYP51 inhibition, resulting in the depletion of ergosterol and**
36 **ergosta-7-enol and the accumulation of eburicol, obtusifolione and**
37 **lanosterol/obtusifoliol in the cell membranes.**

38

39

40 Cryptococcosis is the most common systemic fungal infection in HIV/AIDS
41 immunocompromised patients and is caused by the opportunistic basidiomycete yeast
42 pathogen *Cryptococcus neoformans* (1) leading to infections of the lungs and brain.
43 Meningoencephalitis is the most lethal manifestation of cryptococcosis with a life
44 expectation of less than a month if untreated (2). Pathogenic *Cryptococcus* species
45 cause disease in almost one million people annually with over 620,000 deaths and a
46 third of all HIV/AIDS deaths are attributable to *Cryptococcus* species infection (1).
47 Current treatment options are limited to a handful of drugs, namely initial induction
48 therapy with a combination of amphotericin B and flucytosine followed by a maintenance
49 regime of fluconazole (2). Even after administering the recommended treatment, three-
50 month mortality rates of 10 to 20% are common (3, 4). In addition, adopting such
51 treatment is costly and often impractical (with amphotericin B requiring intravenous
52 administration), especially in developing countries where mortality rates can approach
53 100% (5, 6).

54 Three main *C. neoformans* varieties are observed in clinical infections. *C.*
55 *neoformans* var. *grubii* (primarily serotype A), ubiquitous in the environment especially in
56 soil, is globally distributed and is responsible for almost all cryptococcal infections in
57 HIV/AIDS patients (6-8). *C. neoformans* var. *neoformans* (primarily serotype D) is less
58 likely to cause severe infection and is more commonly found in Europe (4). *C.*
59 *neoformans* var. *gattii* (primarily serotypes B and C), a tree-dwelling basidiomycete
60 yeast primarily located in the tropics and sub-tropics with localized outbreaks in
61 northeast America, is now considered a separate species (*C. gattii*) and is
62 predominantly a primary pathogen infecting healthy (immunocompetent) individuals but
63 will also infect immunocompromised patients if opportunity arises (9). Most

64 *Cryptococcus* infections of humans and nearly all infections of HIV/AIDS patients are
65 caused by *C. neoformans var. grubii*, the most prevalent being the H99 strain, although
66 *C. gattii* infection is increasing in prevalence, especially in North America and Africa (9).
67 The taxonomy of *Cryptococcus* species is still evolving with Hagen *et al* (10) proposing
68 that *C. neoformans var. neoformans* and *C. neoformans var. grubii* are separate species
69 and that *C. gattii* consists of five distinct species based on phylogenetic analysis of 11
70 genetic loci.

71 Azole resistance, especially towards fluconazole, amongst *Cryptococcus* species
72 in the clinic can be problematic due to prolonged maintenance treatment regimens (11).
73 Increased azole tolerance in *Cryptococcus* species has been attributed to point
74 mutations in CYP51, including G484S and Y145F (12, 13), increased expression levels
75 of CYP51 and the transporter protein AFR1 (14) and the genome plasticity of
76 *Cryptococcus* species post infection (15). Recently an *in silico* three-dimensional model
77 of *C. neoformans* CYP51 has been published (16) with the aim of aiding new drug
78 design. Because many of the marketed azole drugs are limited by a low therapeutic
79 index (17), a drug with a higher therapeutic index might be able to combat resistant
80 pathogens at plasma concentrations still below toxic levels.

81 In this study we compared the novel tetrazole antifungal VT-1129 (18, 19) (Fig. 1)
82 with clinical azole antifungal drugs in terms of its potency and selectivity of binding to
83 and inhibition of three recombinant cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes compared to human
84 CYP51, and also to human CYPs that are critical xenobiotic-metabolizing enzymes. In
85 addition, the *in vivo* mode of action for VT-1129 was demonstrated through sterol profile
86 analysis.

87

88 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

89 **Construction of pCWori⁺:CneoCYP51, pCWori⁺:CgruCYP51 and**
90 **pCWori⁺:CgatCYP51 expression vectors.** The *C. neoformans* var. *neoformans* CYP51
91 gene (CneoCYP51 - UniProtKB accession number Q5KQ65), the *C. neoformans* var.
92 *grubii* CYP51 gene (CgruCYP51 - Q09GQ2) and the *C. gattii* CYP51 gene (CgatCYP51
93 - E6QZS1) were synthesized by Eurofins MWG Operon (Ebersberg, Germany)
94 incorporating an *Nde*I restriction site at the 5' end and a *Hind*III restriction site at the 3'
95 end of the genes cloned into the pBSISK⁺ plasmid. In addition the first eight amino
96 acids were changed to 'MALLAVF' (20) and a four-histidine extension
97 (CATCACCATCAC) was inserted immediately before the stop codon. The cryptococcal
98 CYP51 genes were excised by *Nde*I / *Hind*III restriction digestion followed by cloning
99 into the pCWori⁺ expression vector. Gene integrities were confirmed by DNA
100 sequencing.

101 **Heterologous expression and purification of recombinant cryptococcal**
102 **CYP51 proteins.** The pCWori⁺:CYP51 constructs were transformed into competent
103 DH5α *E. coli* cells and expressed as previously described (21). Recombinant CYP51
104 proteins were isolated according to the method of Arase *et al* (22) except that 2%
105 (wt/vol) sodium cholate was used in the sonication buffer and Tween-20 was omitted.
106 The solubilized CYP51 proteins were purified by affinity chromatography using Ni²⁺-NTA
107 agarose as previously described (23, 21) prior to characterization. Human CYP51 with a
108 deletion of 60 amino acids from the N-terminus (Δ60 truncated human CYP51) was
109 expressed and purified as previously described (24) and was shown to be comparable
110 to the full-length human CYP51 in terms of binding azole antifungal drugs. Protein
111 purities were assessed by SDS polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis.

112 **Cytochrome P450 protein determinations.** Reduced carbon monoxide
113 difference spectroscopy was performed (25) with carbon monoxide being passed
114 through the cytochrome P450 solution prior to addition of sodium dithionite to the
115 sample cuvette (light-path 10 mm). An extinction coefficient of $91 \text{ mM}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ (26) was
116 used to calculate cytochrome P450 concentrations from the absorbance difference
117 between 447 and 490 nm. Absolute spectra were determined between 700 and 300 nm
118 (light-path 10 mm). All spectral determinations were made using a Hitachi U-3310
119 UV/VIS spectrophotometer (San Jose, California).

120 **Ligand binding studies.** Stock 2.5 mM solutions of lanosterol, eburicol and
121 obtusifoliol were prepared in 40% (wt/vol) (2-hydroxypropyl)- β -cyclodextrin (HPCD)
122 using an ultrasonic bath. Sterol was progressively titrated against 5 μM CYP51 protein in
123 a quartz semi-micro cuvette (light-path 4.5 mm) with equivalent amounts of 40% (wt/vol)
124 HPCD added to the reference cuvette which also contained 5 μM CYP51. The difference
125 in the spectrum between the absorbance at 500 and that at 350 nm was determined
126 after each incremental addition of sterol (up to 75 μM). The sterol saturation curves were
127 constructed from the difference spectra (difference in the A_{390} and A_{425}). The substrate
128 dissociation constants (K_{ds}) were determined by non-linear regression (Levenberg-
129 Marquardt algorithm) using the Michaelis-Menten equation.

130 Studies evaluating the binding of clotrimazole, fluconazole, voriconazole,
131 itraconazole, ketoconazole and VT-1129 to the cryptococcal CYP51 proteins were
132 performed as previously described (27, 21) using split-cuvettes with a 4.5-mm light path.
133 Stock $0.1\text{-mg}\cdot\text{ml}^{-1}$ solutions of the azole antifungal drugs were prepared in dimethyl
134 sulfoxide (DMSO) and progressively titrated against 2 μM CYP51 in 0.1 M Tris-HCl (pH

135 8.1) and 25% (wt/vol) glycerol. The difference spectra between 500 and 350 nm were
136 determined after each incremental addition of azole and binding saturation curves were
137 constructed from the difference in the absorption at the peak and the absorption at the
138 trough ($\Delta A_{\text{peak-trough}}$) against the azole concentration. The properties of VT-1129 binding
139 with 5 μM recombinant human CYP51 was also determined (24). The K_{d} s of the
140 enzyme-azole complex were determined by non-linear regression (Levenberg-
141 Marquardt algorithm) using a rearrangement of the Morrison equation for tight ligand
142 binding (28, 29). Tight binding occurs where the K_{d} for a ligand is similar or lower than
143 the concentration of the enzyme present (30).

144 **CYP51 reconstitution assays.** Cryptococcal CYP51 reconstitution assays (31,
145 32) contained 0.5 μM CYP51, 1 μM *Aspergillus fumigatus* cytochrome P450 reductase
146 (AfCPR1 - UniProtKB accession number Q4WM67), 50 μM C-14 methylated sterol
147 substrate (lanosterol, eburicol, obtusifolol), 50 μM dilaurylphosphatidylcholine, 4%
148 (wt/vol) (2-hydroxypropyl)- β -cyclodextrin (HPCD), 0.4 mg ml^{-1} isocitrate dehydrogenase,
149 25 mM trisodium isocitrate, 50 mM NaCl, 5 mM MgCl_2 and 40 mM MOPS
150 (morpholinepropanesulfonic acid; pH \sim 7.2). Assay mixtures were incubated at 37°C prior
151 to initiation with 4 mM β -NADPHNa₄ followed by shaking at 37°C for 15 minutes. Human
152 CYP51 reconstitution assays were performed as above except 0.5 μM soluble human
153 CYP51 (24) and 2 μM human cytochrome P450 reductase (UniProtKB accession
154 number P16435) were used and the reaction time reduced to 5 minutes at 37°C. Sterol
155 metabolites were recovered by extraction with ethyl acetate followed by derivatization
156 with *N,O*-bis(trimethylsilyl)trifluoroacetamide (BSTFA) and tetramethylsilane (TMCS)
157 prior to analysis by gas chromatography (GC)-mass spectrometry (MS) (33).

158 Determinations of the 50% inhibitory concentration (IC₅₀s) were performed using
159 50 µM lanosterol as substrate in which various fluconazole, itraconazole, voriconazole
160 and VT-1129 concentrations in 2.5 µl DMSO were added prior to incubation at 37°C and
161 addition of β-NADPHNa₄.

162 **Cryptococcus sterol analysis.** *C. neoformans* var. *neoformans* (strain ATCC
163 MYA-565), *C. neoformans* var. *grubii* (strain ATCC 208821), and *C. gattii* (strain ATCC
164 MYA-4071) were grown in MOPS buffered RPMI (0.165 M MOPS), pH 7.0, at 37°C and
165 200 rpm. MOPS buffered RPMI, pH 7.0, in the absence (1% vol/vol, DMSO control) or
166 with fluconazole or VT-1129 was inoculated at a final concentration of 2.5 x 10⁴ cells ml⁻¹.
167 ¹. *C. neoformans* var. *neoformans* was grown in the presence of 0.2 µg ml⁻¹ fluconazole
168 or 0.0039 µg ml⁻¹ VT-1129, *C. neoformans* var. *grubii* was grown in the presence of 0.4
169 µg ml⁻¹ fluconazole or 0.0039 µg ml⁻¹ VT-1129, and *C. gattii* was grown in the presence
170 of 0.4 µg ml⁻¹ fluconazole or 0.0078 µg ml⁻¹ VT-1129. The cultures were grown for 2
171 days at 37°C, 200 rpm and nonsaponifiable lipids were extracted as previously reported
172 (34).

173 Sterones were derivatized with methoxyamine-HCl by the addition of 200 µl of
174 methoxyamine-HCl (2%, wt/vol, in anhydrous pyridine) and incubated for 30 min at
175 70°C. Samples were mixed with 2 ml of saturated NaCl, and the lipids extracted in three
176 sequential 2-ml volumes of ethyl acetate. The combined ethyl acetate fractions were
177 washed with 2-ml volumes of NaCl-saturated 0.1 M HCl, saturated NaCl, NaCl-saturated
178 5% (wt/vol) sodium bicarbonate solution and saturated NaCl. The samples were then
179 dried over anhydrous magnesium sulphate and evaporated using a vacuum centrifuge.
180 Sterols in the dried extracts were derivatized with 0.1 ml BSTFA-TMCS (99:1) and 0.3
181 ml anhydrous pyridine (2 h at 80°C) prior to analysis by GC-MS (33). Individual sterols

182 and sterones were identified by reference to the retention times, mass ions, and
183 fragmentation patterns of sterol and sterone standards. Sterol composition was
184 calculated using peak areas.

185 **Inhibition of human liver CYP enzymes.** *In vitro* studies determined the IC₅₀s of
186 the test compounds for CYP2C9, CYP2C19, and CYP3A4 (with either midazolam or
187 testosterone as substrates) in intact human liver microsomes. A separate series of
188 incubation mixtures was prepared with each test compound at final concentration in
189 reaction ranging from 0.0128 to 200 μM. Each incubation mixture contained pooled
190 human liver microsomes at an assay concentration of 1 mg ml⁻¹ microsomal protein (Life
191 Technologies, Grand Island, NY) and metabolic substrates of isozymes for CYP2C9,
192 CYP2C19, and CYP3A4 (diclofenac, omeprazole, and midazolam or testosterone,
193 respectively) at their experimentally determined *K_m* concentrations. Active control wells
194 contained microsomes, a substrate(s), and the test-compound diluent (i.e. DMSO-
195 acetonitrile-phosphate buffer, 5:5:190) substituted for test compound solutions. The
196 reaction was initiated by addition of an enzyme cofactor source (NADPH-regenerating
197 solution; BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) and the mixtures were incubated at 37°C. After
198 10 min, incubation mixtures were quenched with acetonitrile, mixed, and centrifuged.
199 The supernatant was analyzed by high-performance liquid chromatography-tandem MS
200 for the hydroxy metabolite of the substrates. Each product peak area was normalized to
201 be represented as a percentage of the enzyme control average. The IC₅₀ of each test
202 compound was determined by fitting a 4-parameter logistical fit to the dose-response
203 data and graphically determining the inhibitor concentration at 50% of the maximal
204 enzymatic response.

205 **Data analysis.** All ligand binding experiments were performed in triplicate and
206 curve-fitting of data performed using the computer program ProFit (version 6.1.12;
207 QuantumSoft, Zurich, Switzerland). GC-MS data were analyzed using Thermo Xcalibur
208 (version 2.2) software.

209 **Chemicals.** VT-1129 was provided by Viamet Pharmaceuticals, Inc. (Durham,
210 USA). All other chemicals were obtained from Sigma Chemical Company (Poole, UK).
211 Growth media, sodium ampicillin, IPTG (isopropyl- β -D-thiogalactopyranoside), and 5-
212 aminolevulinic acid were obtained from Foremedium Ltd (Hunstanton, UK). Ni²⁺-NTA
213 agarose affinity chromatography matrix was obtained from Qiagen (Crawley, UK).

214

215 **RESULTS**

216 **Expression and purification of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins.** Following
217 heterologous expression in *E. coli*, CneoCYP51, CgruCYP51 and CgatCYP51 were
218 extracted by sonication with 2% (wt/vol) sodium cholate (22), which yielded 240 (\pm 90),
219 160 (\pm 50) and 290 (\pm 80) nmoles per liter culture, as determined by carbon monoxide
220 difference spectroscopy (25). Purification by chromatography on Ni²⁺-NTA agarose
221 resulted in 70%, 54% and 45% recoveries of native CneoCYP51, CgruCYP51 and
222 CgatCYP51 proteins, respectively. SDS polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis confirmed
223 the purity of the cryptococcal CYP51 proteins eluted on Ni²⁺-NTA agarose to be greater
224 than 90% when assessed by staining intensity, with apparent molecular weights being
225 55,000 to 58,000; the predicted molecular weights when the N-terminal modifications
226 and the 4His C-terminal extensions are included were 62,708 for *C. neoformans* var.
227 *neoformans*, 62,310 for *C. neoformans* var. *grubii*, and 62,689 for *C. gattii*.

228 **Spectral properties of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins.** The absolute spectra of
229 the resting oxidized forms of all three CYP51 proteins (Fig. 2A) were typical for a low-
230 spin ferric cytochrome P450 enzyme (23, 35) with α , β , Soret (γ) and δ spectral bands at
231 566, 536, 418 and 360 nm, respectively. Reduced carbon monoxide difference spectra
232 (Fig. 2B) gave the red-shifted heme Soret peak at 447 nm, characteristic of P450
233 enzymes, indicating that all three CYP51 proteins were expressed in the native form.

234 **Sterol binding properties of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins.** Progressive
235 titration with lanosterol, eburicol and obtusifoliol gave characteristic type I difference
236 spectra for all three CYP51 proteins with a peak at 390 nm and a trough at 425 nm (Fig.
237 3). Type I binding spectra occur when the substrate or another molecule displaces the
238 water molecule coordinated as the sixth ligand to the low-spin hexa-coordinated heme
239 prosthetic group, causing the heme to adopt the high-spin penta-coordinated
240 conformation (35). The cryptococcal CYP51 proteins had similar affinities for the three
241 sterols (Table 1) with K_d values being 16 to 18 μ M for lanosterol, 12 to 16 μ M for
242 eburicol and 12 to 21 μ M for obtusifoliol. This result suggests that all three 14 α -
243 methylated sterols are potential substrates for the cryptococcal CYP51 proteins.

244 The sterol binding affinities of the three cryptococcal CYP51 proteins (K_d range,
245 12 to 21 μ M) were similar to those reported for other CYP51 proteins. For example, K_d
246 values for lanosterol and eburicol were 11 to 16 and 25 to 28 μ M, respectively, with
247 *Candida albicans* CYP51 (21), 11 and 13 μ M, respectively, with *Mycosphaerella*
248 *graminicola* CYP51 (36); and the K_d values were 0.5 to 18 μ M for lanosterol with human
249 CYP51 (24, 37, 38). However, the sterol K_d values obtained were 10- to 20-fold higher
250 than those obtained for lanosterol with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* CYP51 (1 μ M) (23)

251 and for lanosterol and eburicol with *Trypanosoma cruzi* CYP51 (1.9 and 1.2 μM ,
252 respectively) (32).

253 **CYP51 reconstitution assays.** CYP51 assays using 50 μM sterol gave turnover
254 numbers of 1.2 to 1.9 min^{-1} for lanosterol, 3.7 to 7.6 min^{-1} for eburicol and 3.5 to 4.5 min^{-1}
255 for obtusifoliol (Table 1), confirming that all three cryptococcal CYP51 proteins readily
256 catalyzed the 14α -demethylation of these three sterols. Both CneoCYP51 and
257 CgruCYP51 displayed a substrate preference for eburicol over obtusifoliol and
258 lanosterol, whilst CgatCYP51 displayed a substrate preference for obtusifoliol over
259 eburicol and lanosterol. The ability of CgatCYP51, in particular, to readily demethylate
260 obtusifoliol indicates a preference for a C-24-methylated sterol substrate.

261 **Azole binding properties of CYP51 proteins.** All five medical azole antifungal
262 agents and the agent being investigated, VT-1129, bound tightly to all three cryptococcal
263 CYP51 proteins, producing type II binding spectra. The binding spectra and saturation
264 curves obtained for fluconazole and itraconazole (Fig. 4) and for VT-1129 (Fig. 5) are
265 shown with a peak at ~ 429 nm and a trough at ~ 412 nm. Type II binding spectra are
266 caused by the triazole ring N-4 (fluconazole, itraconazole, and voriconazole) or the
267 imadazole ring N-3 (clotrimazole, ketoconazole) coordinating as the sixth ligand with the
268 heme iron (39) to form the low-spin CYP51-azole complex, resulting in a 'red-shift' of the
269 heme Soret peak. The interaction of VT-1129 with the heme ferric ion is through a
270 terminal (N-3 or N-4) tetrazole nitrogen atom. CneoCYP51 bound the azole antifungal
271 agents the strongest, with apparent K_d values of 4 to 11 nM (Table 1), followed by
272 CgatCYP51 with apparent K_d values of 5 to 24 nM, and CgruCYP51 bound the azole
273 antifungal agents the weakest, with apparent K_d values of 14 to 52 nM. None of the
274 cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes appeared to be inherently resistant to azole antifungal

275 agents, as the range of K_d values observed (4 to 52 nM) was similar to those observed
276 with *C. albicans* CYP51 (10 to 56 nM) (24), whereas *Aspegillus fumigatus* CYP51A
277 appeared to be inherently resistant to fluconazole with an apparent K_d value of 11.9 μ M
278 (40). The affinity of VT-1129 binding to all three cryptococcal CYP51 proteins was strong
279 (K_d range, 11 to 25 nM) and similar to that of the other five clinical azole antifungal
280 agents examined, suggesting VT-1129 would be effective as a therapeutic agent against
281 *Cryptococcus* species infections. The similar azole binding properties of the three
282 cryptococcal CYP51 proteins agree with their close sequence homology with
283 CneoCYP51 sharing 98% and 96% sequence identity with CgruCYP51 and CgatCYP51,
284 respectively.

285 In contrast, VT-1129 bound relatively weakly to human CYP51 (Fig. 5) with an
286 apparent K_d of 4.53 μ M (Table 1). The interaction of VT-1129 with human CYP51 was
287 atypical, as it gave rise to a red-shifted type I difference spectrum (peak at 410 nm and
288 trough at 426 nm) rather than the expected type II difference spectrum normally
289 observed for the interaction of azole antifungal agents with CYP51 proteins. This
290 suggests that the mode of interaction of VT-1129 with the human CYP51 was different
291 from that observed with the three cryptococcal CYP51 proteins. VT-1129 still perturbs
292 the heme environment of human CYP51, as a difference spectrum was observed,
293 though it was not through the azole nitrogen directly coordinating with the heme ferric
294 ion. This altered interaction of VT-1129 with human CYP51 resulted in very weak
295 inhibition of CYP51 activity in the CYP51 reconstitution assay (see below). The K_d
296 values obtained for VT-1129 with the cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes were 180- to 410-
297 fold lower than the K_d value obtained with the human homolog, confirming the high
298 selectivity of VT-1129 for the fungal target enzyme. This compared favorably with the

299 findings for fluconazole and voriconazole, which gave K_d values that were 370- to 1,300-
300 fold and 120- to 570-fold lower, respectively, for cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes than
301 human CYP51. VT-1129 exhibited far greater selectivity than clotrimazole,
302 ketoconazole, and itraconazole toward cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes than toward the
303 human homolog, with clotrimazole, ketoconazole, and itraconazole exhibiting K_d values
304 that were only 1.3- to 15-fold lower for the fungal CYP51 than for the human CYP51.

305 **Azole IC₅₀ determinations.** IC₅₀ determinations (Fig. 6) confirmed that all three
306 cryptococcal CYP51 proteins tightly bound fluconazole, itraconazole voriconazole and
307 VT-1129, giving rise to strong inhibition of the CYP51 demethylation of lanosterol. IC₅₀s
308 of 0.14 to 0.20 μ M (Table 1), which were obtained which were close to half the CYP51
309 concentration present in the assay system, were obtained. VT-1129 proved equally as
310 effective at inhibiting cryptococcal CYP51 activity as the three other azole antifungal
311 drugs, suggesting VT-1129 would be effective at combating *Cryptococcus* infections. In
312 contrast, VT-1129 only weakly inhibited human CYP51 activity (IC₅₀, ~600 μ M) (Fig. 7),
313 in agreement with the weak perturbation of the heme environment of human CYP51
314 observed with VT-1129 (Fig. 5), whereas clotrimazole severely inhibited human CYP51
315 activity (IC₅₀, 1.9 μ M). The IC₅₀s of VT-1129 observed for the cryptococcal CYP51
316 enzymes were 3,300- to 4,000-fold lower than that obtained with the human homolog
317 (Table 1), again confirming high selectivity for the fungal target enzyme. This was
318 comparable to the findings for fluconazole, where the IC₅₀s for the fungal CYP51
319 enzymes were 6,500- to 9,000-fold lower than those for human CYP51 and with the
320 selectivity observed with fluconazole being significantly better than that observed with
321 voriconazole and itraconazole (Table 1). The IC₅₀s of VT-1129 were more potent than
322 the K_d values for binding to cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes, suggesting that the K_d values

323 calculated by the Morrison equation were an overestimate, in part due to the relatively
324 high CYP51 protein concentrations required for *in vitro* binding studies.

325 **Cryptococcus sterol content.** The treatment of *Cryptococcus* spp. with 0.2 to
326 0.4 $\mu\text{g ml}^{-1}$ fluconazole and 0.0039 to 0.0078 $\mu\text{g ml}^{-1}$ VT-1129 resulted in the
327 accumulation of eburicol (Table 2), obtusifolione and lanosterol/obtusifoliol. The
328 accumulation of CYP51 substrates is indicative of direct CYP51 inhibition in treated
329 cells. Both azole treatments resulted in the depletion of the post-CYP51 sterol
330 metabolites ergosta-7,22-dienol and ergosta-7-enol and the partial depletion of
331 ergosterol levels (Table 2), showing CYP51 inhibition. In these cellular experiments, VT-
332 1129 was significantly more potent than fluconazole, as VT-1129 caused greater
333 inhibition of cryptococcal CYP51 activity at a 50-fold lower concentration than
334 fluconazole (relative to the results observed with the DMSO control, VT-1129 caused
335 greater reductions in ergosterol levels than fluconazole at a 50-fold higher concentration,
336 and in all cases, the accumulation of the 14-methylated product showed that CYP51
337 was inhibited in cells; Table 2).

338 **Inhibition of human liver drug-metabolizing CYPs.** The inhibition of three
339 critical xenobiotic-metabolizing CYPs by the four approved azole drugs and VT-1129 is
340 shown in Table 3. The IC_{50}s of the marketed agents available in the literature (41-43)
341 agree well with those measured in this study. The imidazole-containing agent
342 clotrimazole was the most potent CYP inhibitor, inhibiting the activities of all CYPs at
343 sub- or low-micromolar concentrations. The three triazole-containing agents had
344 variable inhibitory potencies, with itraconazole potently inhibiting CYP3A4 with either
345 substrate (IC_{50}s , 0.08 and 0.13 μM), voriconazole inhibiting the activities of all CYPs with

346 a relatively tight range of potencies (IC₅₀s, 4 to 13 μM), and fluconazole showing a
347 slightly broader range (IC₅₀s, 6 to 34 μM). In contrast, VT-1129 weakly inhibited the
348 activities of each of these enzymes (IC₅₀s, 79 to 178 μM).

349

350 **DISCUSSION**

351 Sionov *et al* (14) demonstrated that *C. neoformans* strains are heteroresistant to
352 fluconazole, with each strain yielding a sub-population that can survive in the presence
353 of fluconazole concentrations well above the MIC values through disomy of
354 chromosome 1, which duplicates the CYP51 and AFR1 transporter genes. The disomy
355 of chromosome 1 coupled with reported G484S and Y145F CYP51 mutations (12, 13)
356 increased CYP51 and AFR1 expression levels (14), and the genome plasticity post
357 infection (15) may explain the divergent range of MIC values of fluconazole of 0.5 to 64
358 μg ml⁻¹ reported for *Cryptococcus* spp. (44-47). The MIC values reported for
359 voriconazole (0.008 to 0.5 μg ml⁻¹), itraconazole (0.015 to 0.5 μg ml⁻¹), and
360 posaconazole (0.008 to 0.5 μg ml⁻¹) were lower and less variable than those reported for
361 fluconazole (44-47), indicating the therapeutic efficacy of these triazole antifungals and
362 their potential for use should fluconazole tolerance become problematic. However, as
363 previously observed with *Candida* spp. and *Aspergillus* spp., it can be anticipated that
364 tolerance against current triazole therapeutics will emerge in *Cryptococcus* spp.

365 New antifungal drug candidates for the treatment of systemic *Cryptococcus*
366 infection which target CYP51 should ideally have high potency against the intended
367 cryptococcal CYP51 target enzymes and minimal interaction with human CYP51 and
368 other critical CYP enzymes, such as those that metabolize xenobiotics. VT-1129 meets

369 both these criteria by binding tightly to cryptococcal CYP51 enzymes (K_d range, 11 to 25
370 nM) with a high affinity similar to that of other pharmaceutical azole antifungal agents (K_d
371 range, 4 to 52 nM) while binding weakly to the CYP51 of the human host *in vitro* (K_d ,
372 4.53 μ M). Binding studies (Fig. 4 and 5) provide useful preliminary information on a
373 cyclized nitrogen-containing antifungal drug candidate's likely effectiveness at inhibiting
374 CYP51 activity. However, only IC_{50} determinations using a CYP51 reconstitution assay
375 system can determine the functional activity of each compound as a CYP51 inhibitor.
376 IC_{50} determinations confirmed that VT-1129 is a strong inhibitor of cryptococcal CYP51
377 activity, consistent with tight binding inhibition, but only weakly inhibits human CYP51
378 (13% inhibition at 150 μ M VT-1129). The selectivity of VT-1129 for the cryptococcal
379 CYP51 protein over the human homolog was ~3,300-fold in terms of inhibiting CYP51
380 catalysis, and VT-1129 was as effective as conventional triazole antifungal drugs at
381 inhibiting cryptococcal CYP51 activity. VT-1129's selectivity for inhibiting cryptococcal
382 CYP51 was similarly high compared to its selectivity for inhibiting key human xenobiotic-
383 metabolizing CYPs, suggesting a low potential for clinical drug-drug interactions.

384 Sterol profile analysis confirmed that VT-1129 inhibited cryptococcal CYP51
385 activity in whole cells, resulting in the depletion of ergosterol and ergosta-7-enol from the
386 cell membranes and the accumulation of the 14-methylated compounds eburicol and
387 lanosterol/obtusifoliol and obtusifolione. In a separate study measuring a large number
388 of *Cryptococcus* species isolates and using 50% inhibition as the endpoint, the MIC_{90} of
389 VT-1129 was 0.060 μ g ml⁻¹ for 180 isolates of *C. neoformans* and 0.25 μ g ml⁻¹ for 321
390 isolates of *C. gattii* (19), confirming that VT-1129 is a potent inhibitor of *Cryptococcus*
391 growth. In both studies, VT-1129 was a more potent inhibitor of *Cryptococcus* CYP51
392 than fluconazole. In addition, VT-1129 retains all or most of its antifungal potency

393 against 50 Ugandan clinical isolates of *C. neoformans* with elevated fluconazole MIC
394 values (48). This potency coupled with its excellent selectivity for fungal rather than
395 human CYP enzymes shown here supports VT-1129 as a good candidate for the
396 treatment of systemic *Cryptococcus* infections. Given the unmet need for more potent
397 drugs for the treatment of cryptococcosis, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, further
398 assessments in clinical trials are warranted, with VT-1129 Phase 1 studies with healthy
399 volunteers now being underway.

400

401 **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

402 We are grateful to the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council National
403 Mass Spectrometry Service Centre at Swansea University and Marcus Hull for
404 assistance with GC-MS analyses.

405 This work was supported in part by the European Regional Development
406 Fund/Welsh Government funded BEACON research program (Swansea University), the
407 National Science Foundation of the United States (grant NSF-MCB-09020212 awarded
408 to W. David Nes, Texas Tech University), and by Viamet Pharmaceuticals, Inc.
409 (Durham, NC 27703, USA).

410

411 **FUNDING INFORMATION**

412 This work, including the efforts of W. David Nes, was funded by NSF (NSF-MCB-
413 09020212).

414

415

416

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VT-1129 and cryptococcal CYP51s

587 **TABLE 1** Ligand binding affinities, azole IC₅₀s, and turnover numbers for CYP51

CYP51	K _d (nM)							
	Sterols			Azoles				
	Lanosterol	Eburicol	Obtusifoliol	Clotrimazole	Fluconazole	Itraconazole	Ketoconazole	Voriconazole
CneoCYP51	16,300 ±2,800	13,000 ±1,200	16,800 ±2,100	4 ±3	9 ±5	7 ±3	6 ±2	4 ±3
CgruCYP51	17,300 ±900	11,700 ±600	12,200 ±3,000	44 ±18	52 ±15	42 ±11	32 ±15	14 ±3
CgatCYP51	17,500 ±1,900	15,800 ±1,300	20,600 ±1,000	11 ±4	24 ±9	6 ±2	5 ±2	19 ±3
HsapCYP51	18,400 ±1,500 ^b			55 ±5 ^b	30,400 ±4,100 ^b	92 ±7 ^b	42 ±16 ^a	2,200 ±300

588 ^a HsapCYP51, *Homo sapiens* CYP51.

589 ^b Values were taken from Warrilow *et al.* (24).

590 ^c Thirteen percent inhibition was observed in the presence of 150 μM VT-1129.

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594 **TABLE 1** (Continued)

CYP51	IC ₅₀ (μM)					Turnover no. (min ⁻¹)	
	Clotrimazole	Fluconazole	Itraconazole	Voriconazole	VT-1129	Lanosterol	Eburicol
CneoCYP51		0.17	0.17	0.17	0.16	1.4 ±0.2	6.1 ±0.2
CgruCYP51		0.2	0.19	0.2	0.18	1.9 ±0.3	7.6 ±0.3
CgatCYP51		0.14	0.16	0.16	0.15	1.2 ±0.2	3.7 ±0.2
HsapCYP51	1.9	~1,300 ^b	70 ^b	112	~600 ^c	22.7 ±4.8	

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VT-1129 and cryptococcal CYP51s

597 **TABLE 2** Sterol profiles of *Cryptococcus* spp.

Sterols	Sterol composition (%) with the indicated treatment ^a						
	<i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>neoformans</i>			<i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>grubii</i>			<i>C. gattii</i>
	DMSO	+FLUC	+VT1129	DMSO	+FLUC	+VT1129	DMSO
Ergosta-5,7,22,24(28)-tetraenol	-	1.2 ±0.3	5.0 ±0.5	2.5 ±1.4	2.1 ±1.6	2.3 ±0.3	-
Ergosta-5,8,22-trienol	-	1.0 ±0.0	3.7 ±0.3	-	-	-	-
Ergosterol	60.6 ±2.5	42.2 ±0.7	11.5 ±3.9	43.9 ±4.3	34.1 ±3.6	18.7 ±0.6	49.3 ±9.7
Ergosta-7,22-dienol	7.4 ±0.4	-	-	9.3 ±1.1	-	-	10.8 ±6.0
Fecosterol (E8,24(28))	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.0 ±0.9
Ergosta-8-enol	-	1.6 ±0.4	-	-	-	-	-
Ergosta 5,7 dienol	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.0 ±0.6
Ergosta-7-enol	25.3 ±1.0	-	-	28.8 ±0.5	-	-	30.2 ±6.6
Eburicone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lanosterol / Obtusifoliol	-	3.7 ±0.9	4.4 ±0.2	1.7 ±1.1	10.9 ±2.1	4.9 ±0.0	-
4-methyl fecosterol	-	-	-	2.5 ±0.4	-	-	-
Obtusifolione	-	35.9 ±1.8	17.1 ±1.0	-	22.1 ±1.5	24.5 ±0.6	-
Eburicol	1.5 ±0.8	12.8 ±0.7	55.8 ±5.7	6.8 ±2.0	30.0 ±2.1	49.1 ±1.1	3.1 ±2.5
4,4-dimethyl-ergosta-8,24(28)-dienol	-	-	-	4.0 ±0.8	-	-	-

598 ^a Mean values from three replicates ± standard deviations are shown. FLUC, fluconazole.

VT-1129 and cryptococcal CYP51s

600 **TABLE 3** Inhibition of human liver CYPs by fungal CYP51 inhibitors.

Inhibitor	IC ₅₀ (μM) ^a			
	2C9	2C19	3A4 ^b	3A4 ^c
Clotrimazole	1.4 (0.1)	0.6 (0.2)	0.03 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)
Fluconazole	34 (10)	13 (9)	32 (5)	32 (5)
Itraconazole	80 (28)	78 (31)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)
Voriconazole	10 (5)	10 (4)	13 (4)	13 (4)
VT-1129	87 (21)	110 (80)	79 (23)	79 (23)

601 ^a Values are averages of 2 to 4 separate determinations with standard deviations in parentheses.

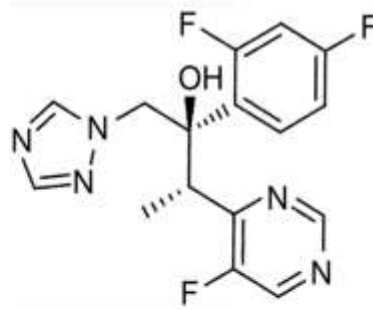
602 ^b Testosterone as substrate.

603 ^c Midazolam as substrate.

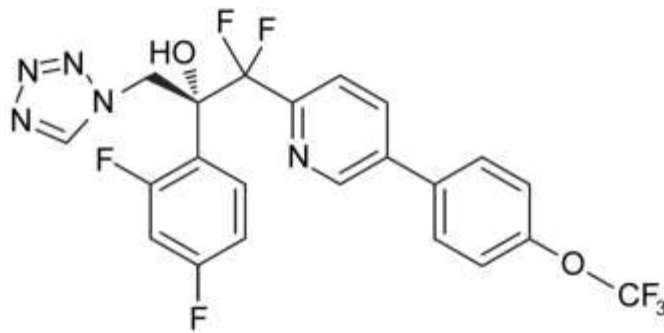
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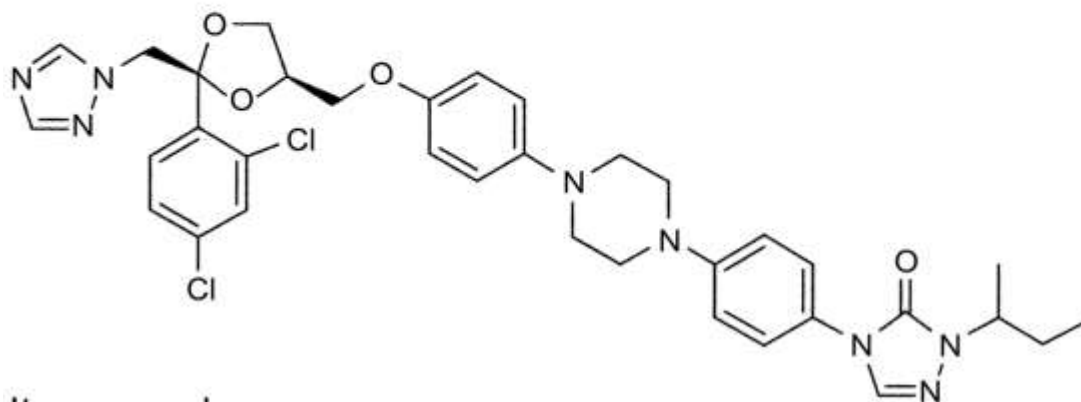
Fluconazole



Voriconazole



VT-1129



Itraconazole

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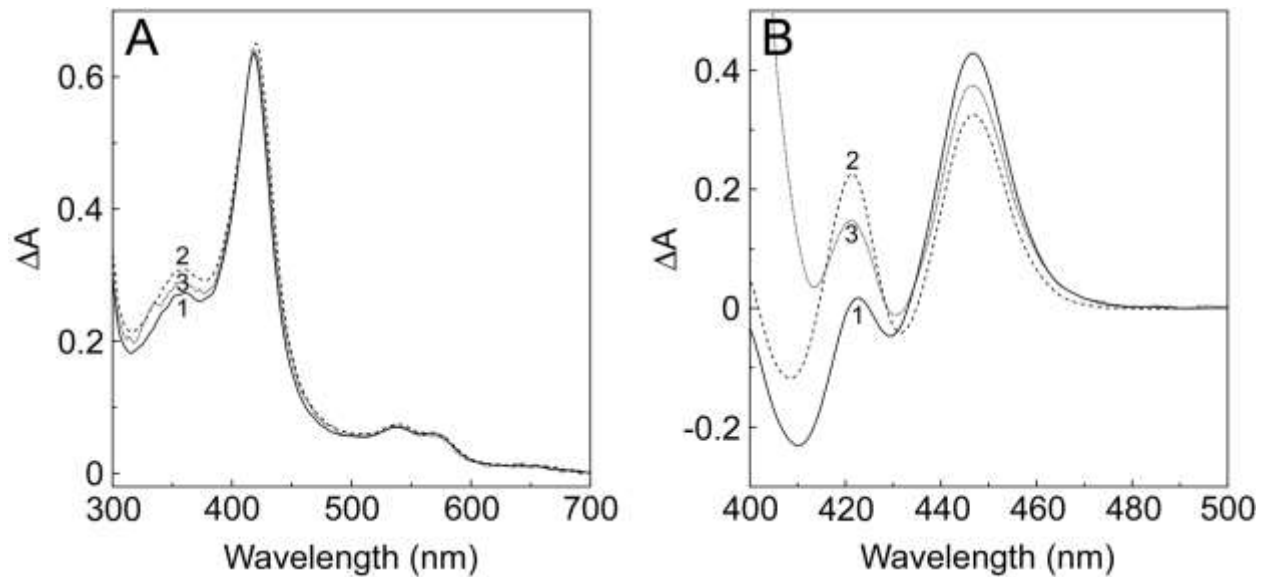
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FIG 1 Chemical structures of the azole antifungals used for IC₅₀ studies. The chemical structures of fluconazole (molecular weight, 306), voriconazole (molecular weight, 349), VT-1129 (molecular weight, 513), and itraconazole (molecular weight, 706) are shown.

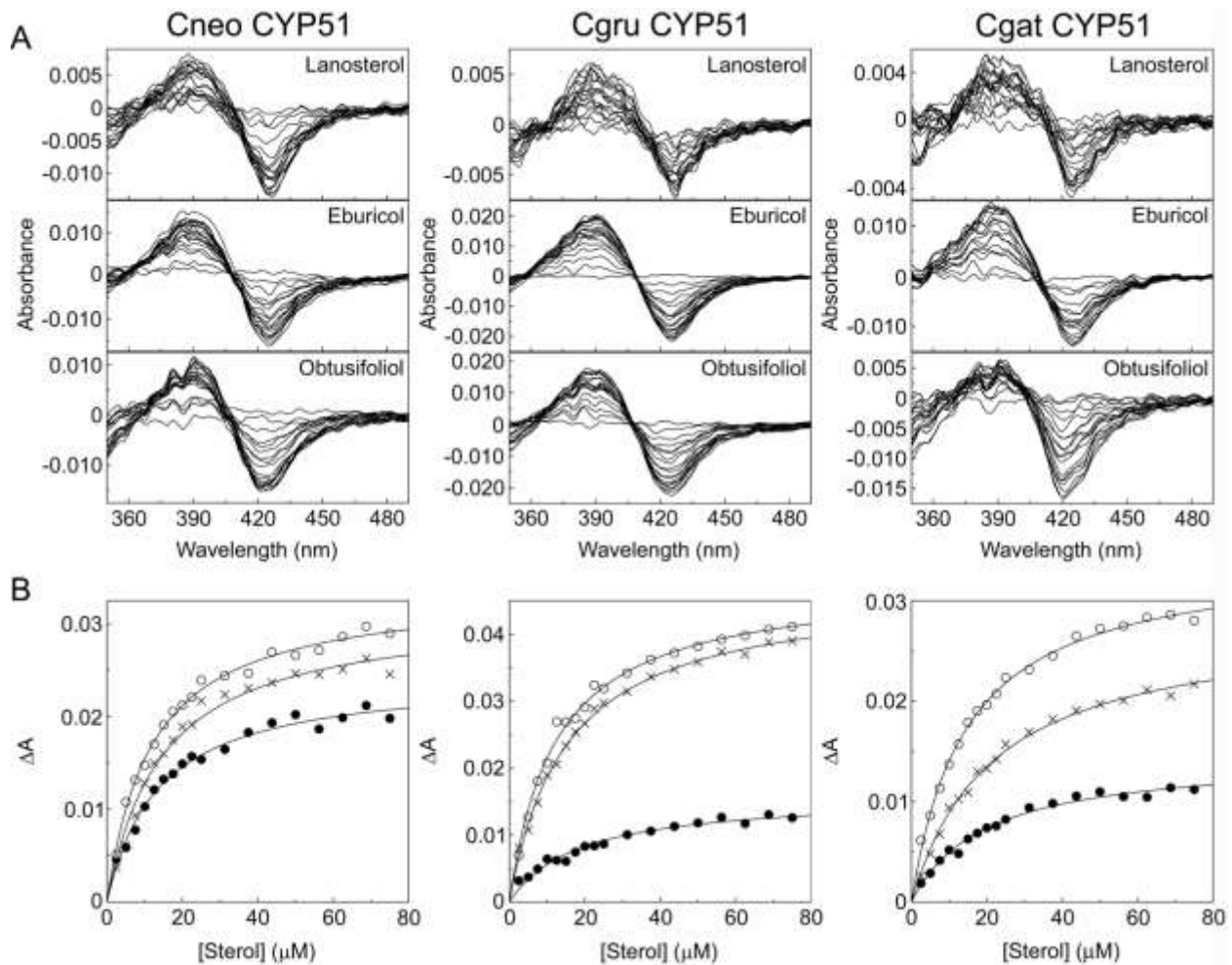
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613 **FIG 2** Absolute and reduced carbon monoxide spectra of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins.
614 Absolute spectra in the oxidised resting state (A) and reduced carbon monoxide
615 difference spectra (B) were determined using 5 μ M solutions of purified CneoCYP51
616 (line 1), CgruCYP51 (line 2), and CgatCYP51 (line 3). Spectral determinations were
617 made using quartz semimicrocuvettes with a path length of 10 mm.

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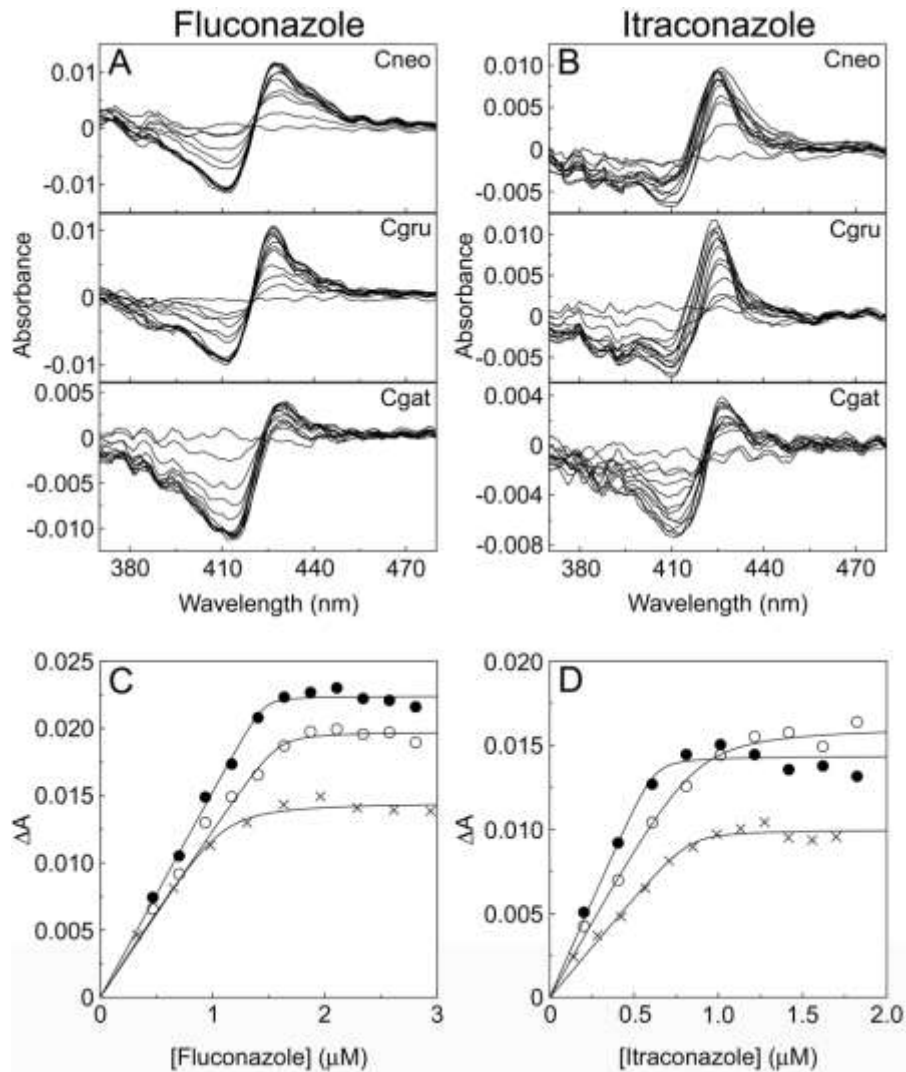
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FIG 3 Sterol binding properties of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins. (A) Absorbance difference spectra were measured during the progressive titration of 5 μM CYP51 proteins with lanosterol, eburicol and obtusifolliol. (B) Sterol saturation curves were constructed for lanosterol (filled circles), eburicol (hollow circles) and obtusifolliol (crosses) with the CYP51 proteins from the difference between the A_{390} and A_{425} of the type I binding spectra observed and were fitted using the Michaelis-Menten equation.



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 634 **FIG 4** Azole binding properties of cryptococcal CYP51 proteins. Fluconazole and
 635 itraconazole were progressively titrated against 2 μM CneoCYP51, CgruCYP51, and
 636 CgatCYP51. (A and B) The resultant type II difference spectra obtained with fluconazole
 637 (A) and itraconazole (B) are shown. (C and D) Fluconazole (C) and itraconazole (D)
 638 saturation curves were constructed from the $\Delta A_{\text{peak-trough}}$ of the type II binding spectra
 639 observed for CneoCYP51 (solid circles), CgruCYP51 (hollow circles), and CgatCYP51
 640 (crosses). A rearrangement of the Morrison equation was used to fit the tight ligand
 641 binding observed. All experiments were performed in triplicate, although the results of
 642 only one replicate are shown.

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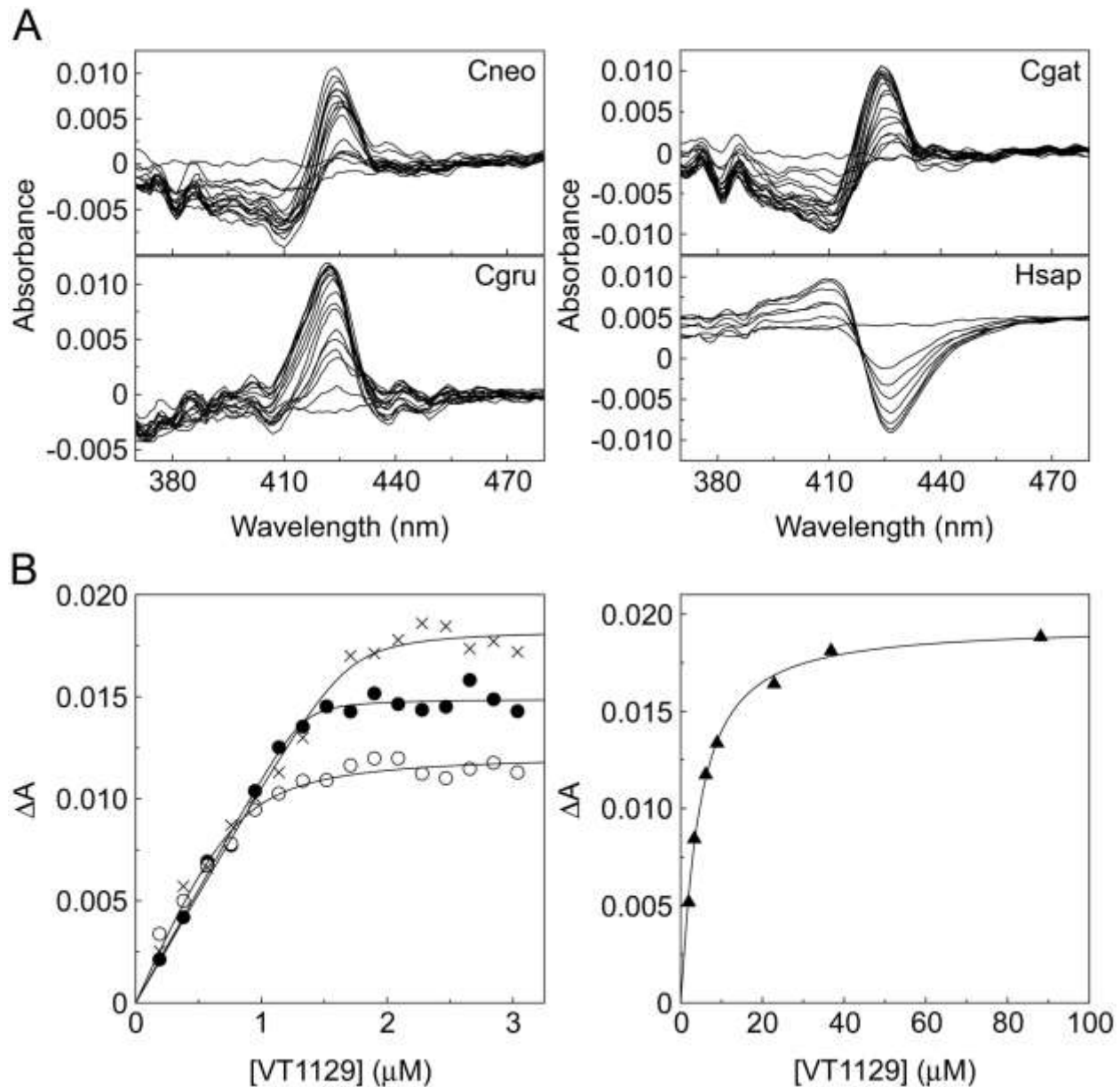
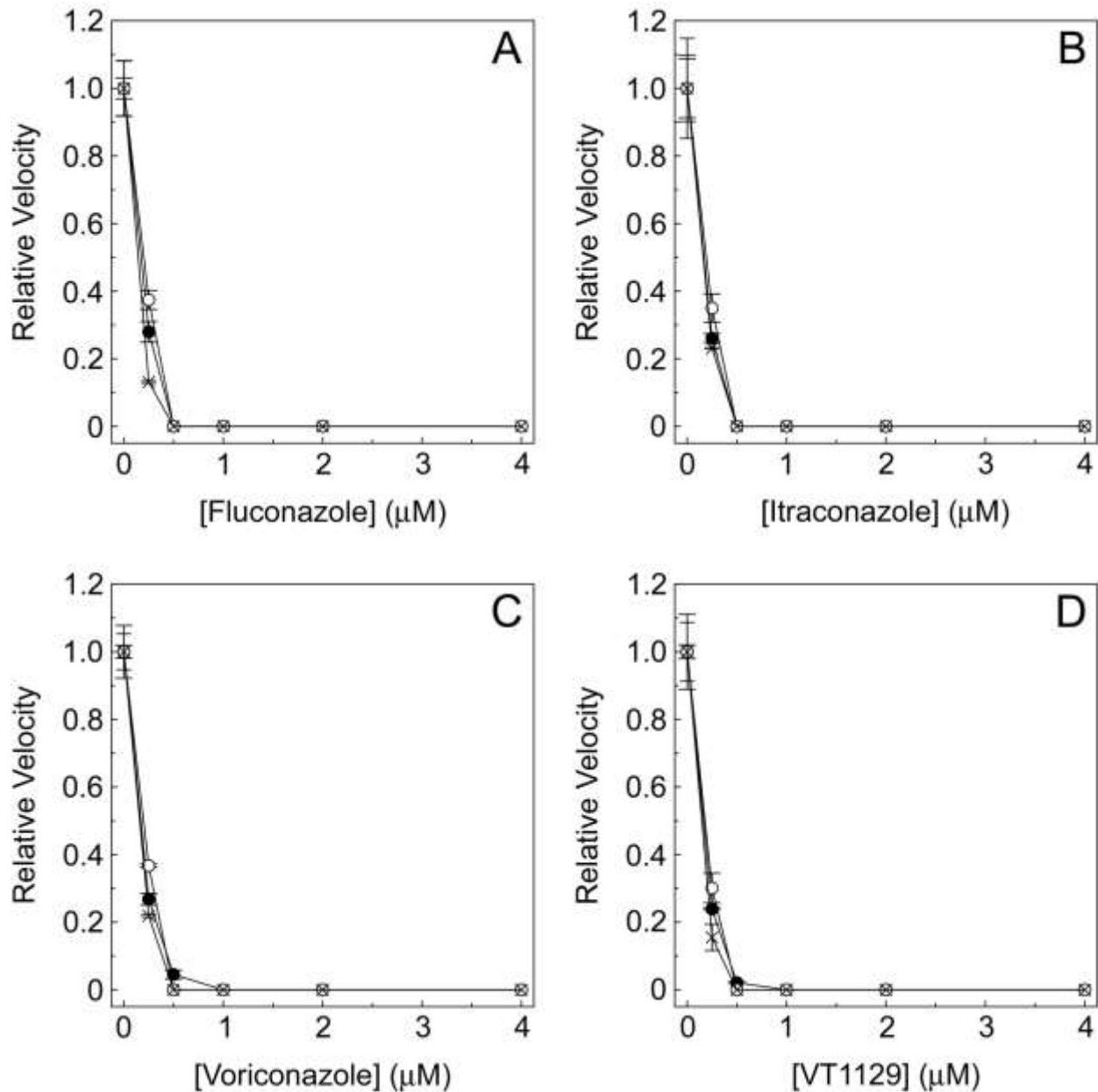
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FIG 5 VT-1129 binding properties of cryptococcal and human CYP51 proteins. VT-1129
 647 was progressively titrated against 4 μM CneoCYP51, CgruCYP51, and CgatCYP51 and
 648 5 μM human (*Homo sapiens*) CYP51 (Hsap). (A) The resultant type II difference spectra
 649 obtained with the three cryptococcal CYP51 proteins and the red-shifted type I
 650 difference spectrum with human CYP51 are shown. (B) Saturation curves were

VT-1129 and cryptococcal CYP51s

651 constructed from the $\Delta A_{\text{peak-trough}}$ of the type II binding spectra observed for CneoCYP51
652 (solid circles), CgruCYP51 (hollow circles), CgatCYP51 (crosses), and the red-shifted
653 type I binding spectrum observed for human CYP51 (solid triangles). A rearrangement
654 of the Morrison equation was used to fit the tight ligand binding observed. All
655 experiments were performed in triplicate, although the results of only one replicate are
656 shown.

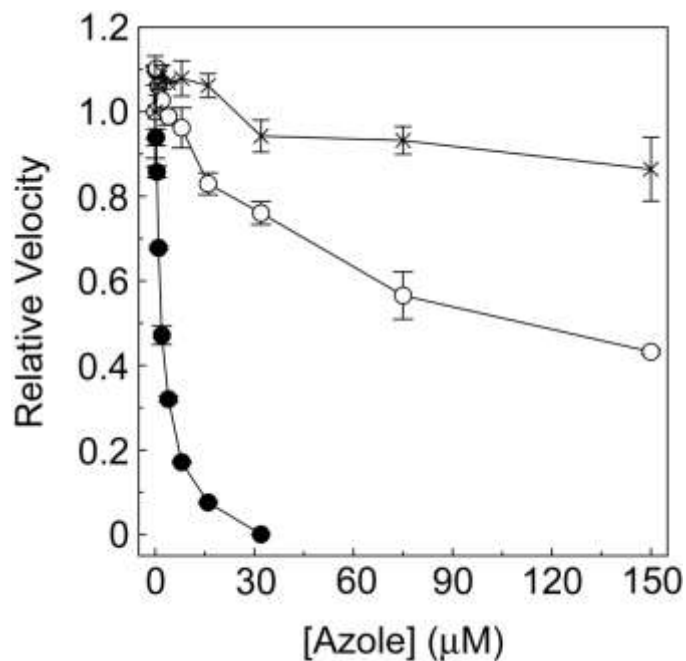
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660 **FIG 6** Azole IC₅₀ determinations for cryptococcal CYP51 proteins. The IC₅₀s of
 661 fluconazole (A), itraconazole (B), voriconazole (C) and VT-1129 (D) for 0.5 μM
 662 CneoCYP51 (filled circles), CgruCYP51 (hollow circles) and CgatCYP51 (crosses) were
 663 determined using the CYP51 reconstitution assay with 1 μM AfCPR1 as the redox
 664 partner.

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669 **FIG 7** IC₅₀ determinations with human CYP51 for clotrimazole, voriconazole, and VT-
670 1129. The CYP51 reconstitution assay contained 0.5 µM human CYP51 and 2 µM
671 human cytochrome P450 reductase as the redox partner in the presence of clotrimazole
672 (filled circles), voriconazole (hollow circles), and VT-1129 (crosses) at concentrations
673 ranging from 0 to 150 µM.

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