Policy Brief 3

Advancements in Methylmercury (MeHg) Detection Using Biosensors

Objective

The PhD research undertaken by ESR 11, Allwin Mabes Raj, focused on developing an innovative and cost-effective biosensor for detecting monomethylmercury (MeHg), a highly toxic environmental contaminant. The primary goal was to create a biosensor that combines high sensitivity, simplicity, and affordability for rapid screening of MeHg, addressing critical gaps in monitoring systems for public health and environmental safety.

Achievements and Key Findings

1. **High specificity for MeHg:**
   The research identified and utilized the MerB protein, an organomercurial lyase, known for its exceptional specificity to MeHg. The protein's ability to efficiently cleave the carbon-mercury bond in MeHg was leveraged, ensuring minimal interference from other mercury species like Hg^{2+}.
2. **Nanomaterial integration for enhanced sensitivity:**
   To enhance the biosensor's sensitivity, MerB was coupled with gold nanoparticles (AuNPs), which amplified the electrochemical signal. The biosensor demonstrated a detection limit as low as 3 femtograms, making it highly sensitive for real-time monitoring.
3. **Simplicity and cost-effectiveness:**
   The biosensor is designed for ease of use with minimal technical expertise required. Its portability and ability to function without complex sample preparation or expensive laboratory equipment make it ideal for on-site applications in diverse settings such as environmental monitoring and food safety.
4. **Successful field testing:**
   Preliminary field trials confirmed the biosensor's potential for detecting MeHg in environmental samples and fish tissue, making it a viable tool for regulatory compliance and monitoring in MeHg-contaminated sites.

Impact

- **Public health:** By enabling fast and cost-effective screening of MeHg in food and water, the biosensor can significantly improve public health safety, particularly for vulnerable populations like pregnant women and children.

- **Environmental monitoring:** This biosensor will contribute to better understanding and management of MeHg contamination in aquatic ecosystems, helping prevent the toxic accumulation of mercury in the food chain.
- **Cost efficiency:** The low-cost, easy-to-use design of the biosensor makes it a viable option for widespread deployment in developing countries and remote areas, democratizing access to high-quality environmental monitoring tools.

Conclusion and recommendations

The development of this MeHg biosensor represents a significant step forward in environmental and food safety monitoring. It promises to reduce the reliance on expensive, complex laboratory equipment while offering high sensitivity and rapid results. The next steps include optimizing the biosensor for broader applications and scaling up production to meet global demand for MeHg detection.

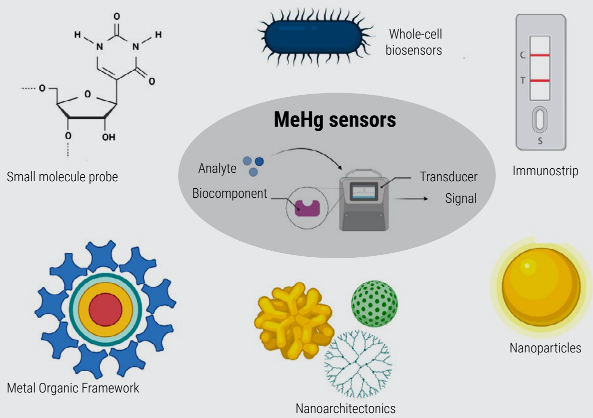

Figure 1: Overview of MeHg Detection Techniques
This figure illustrates a range of detection techniques employed in MeHg sensors, including small molecule probes, whole-cell biosensors (WCB), immunostrip assays, metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), and nanoarchitectonics-based sensors. The central diagram highlights the core components of currently known MeHg sensors, emphasizing the interaction between the analyte and the recognition element, followed by signal transduction.

References

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This project will receive funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 860497