Pakistan Veterinary Journal

ISSN: 0253-8318 (PRINT), 2074-7764 (ONLINE)
DOI: 10.29261/pakvetj/2021.031

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toxicity Assessment of Dibutyl Phthalate in Grass Carp: An Integrated Biomarker Approach

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ARTICLE HISTORY (20-486)

Received: September 22, 2020
Revised: February 26, 2021
Accepted: March 07, 2021
Published online: March 09, 2021

Key words:
Dibutyl Pthalate
Grass carp
Oxidative stress
Phthalates

A B S T R A C T

Phthalates are the common plasticisers used around the globe. Dibutyl phthalate (DBP) is a ubiquitous, extensively used in cosmetics and frequently present in the aquatic environment. Therefore, toxic effects of DBP were evaluated in terms of oxidative stress and biochemical biomarkers. For this reason, a 21-day exposure was conducted by exposing grass carp with graded concentrations of DBP (1, 10, 100 and 1000 µg/L). After 21days, stress biomarkers: lipid peroxidation (LPO), catalase (CAT) activity, glutathione-*S*-transferases (GST) activity and level of reduced glutathione were evaluated in liver, kidney and gills. Alkaline phosphatase (ALP), aspartate transaminase (AST), urea and creatinine were evaluated in liver and kidney homogenates respectively. Moreover, effect of DBP on all biomarkers were evaluated through integrated biomarker response (IBR). Exposure of fish to DBP resulted in oxidative stress in grass carp as evidenced by an increase in lipid peroxidation and decrease in antioxidant enzymes. DBP exposure also resulted in increased liver's ALT and AST levels. Urea and creatinine were also significantly increased in kidney after exposure to DBP. The IBR showed bad scores as the DBP concentration increased, with the highest one (1000 µg/L) presenting a score >250x the value for the control treatment. Additionally, the IBR/n showed that the most impacted organ was the kidney, followed by the liver and the gills. The obtained results show the need for deeper research into the effects of DBP on fish and their impact on different organs.

To Cite This Article: Faheem M, Zahid Z and Ferreira NGC, 2021. Toxicity assessment of Dibutyl phthalate in Grass carp: an integrated biomarker approach. Pak Vet J, 41(3): 365-371. http://dx.doi.org/10.29261/pakvetj/2021.031

INTRODUCTION

Phthalates, commonly known as phthalate esters, are the alkyl/aryl esters of phthalic acids (Bello *et al.,* 2014). They are common plasticisers, being used since 1930, and are generally added to polyvinyl chloride (PVC) to make them soft and durable (Gao and Wen, 2015). PVC may contain up to 50% phthalate plasticisers and are used in a variety of everyday products such as lubricants, adhesives, paints, waxes, medical tubing and many personal care products (Fromme *et al.,* 2002; Schettler *et al.,* 2006; Paluselli *et al.,* 2018). The production of phthalates has increased from 1.8 million tons in 1975 to 8 million tons in 2011 (Peijnenburg and Struijs 2006; Net *et al.,* 2015). Every year approximately 470 million pounds of phthalates are produced globally (Agency, 2012). Since phthalate are not chemically bound, immediate leaching to the surrounding environment occur through microbial action, photo-degradation, hydrolysis and adsorption (Zhao *et al.,* 2004; Ayranci and Bayram 2005; Jonsson *et al.,* 2006). Phthalates are generally classified on the base of their molecular weight. Dibutyl phthalate (DBT) is a low molecular weight phthalate and used in the production of caulk, varnish, cosmetics, food packing, textiles and food wrappings (Agency, 2012) and is listed on EPA as toxic chemical (Heise and Litz, 2004). Previous studies have shown that DBP induced reproductive and developmental toxicity in three-spined sticklebacks (*Gasterosteus aculetaus* - (Aoki *et al.,* 2011), fathead minnow (*Pimephales promelas*- (Crago and Klaper, 2012), murray rainbowfish (*Melanotaenia fluviatilis* - (Bhatia, 2014) neuro and immunotoxicity in zebrafish (*Danio rerio* - (Xu *et al.,* 2013a, 2015) and oxidative stress in Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus* - (Erkmen *et al.,* 2015).

Biomarkers or biological markers can be defined as a set of changes in organism's physiology, biochemistry and histology after exposure to contaminants (Peakall

1994; Quesada-García *et al.,* 2013). Biomarkers are used to evaluate the effects of sub-lethal or chronic exposure of a contaminant (van der Oost *et al.,* 2003). They provide early warning signals to exposure of a contaminant and are used extensively in toxicological studies and environmental monitoring (van der Oost *et al.,* 2003; Cravo *et al.,* 2011; Hook *et al.,* 2016). Early biological signals range from the molecular and subcellular level to organismal and population level (Beliaeff and Burgeot 2002; Marigómez *et al.,* 2013). The selection of suitable biomarkers and integration of their responses is a reliable and powerful tool that can help in data interpretation. One group of biomarkers normally used in toxicological assays is the one related to oxidative stress. Oxidative stress is induced by free radicals and reactive oxygen species (ROS) and is defined by the imbalance between production and elimination of these free radicals and ROS (Valavanidis *et al.,* 2006). To surmount the free radicles and ROS, the body has an antioxidant defence system that includes enzymatic (catalase; glutathione peroxidase; superoxide dismutase) and non-enzymatic antioxidants (glutathione; vitamin C (de Zwart *et al.,* 1999; Valavanidis *et al.,* 2006). Oxidative stress results in DNA damage (Gào *et al.,* 2019; Santos *et al.,* 2016) and inflammation (Reuter *et al.,* 2010). Many anthropogenic chemicals induced the production of ROS in vital fish organs that leads to detrimental effects on fish health (Faheem and Lone 2017; Abd-Elkareem *et al.,* 2018; Abdel-Tawwab and Hamed 2018).

Amino transferases and phosphatases are important liver functioning enzymes and are considered potential candidates for assessing liver health (McGill, 2016).

In this study, we investigate the effects of DBP in grass carp (*Ctenopharyngodon idella*) when exposed for 21 days. Biomarkers of oxidative stress (Lipid peroxidation, reduced glutathione level, catalase and glutathione-*S*-transferases activity), nephrotoxicity (creatinine, uric acid) and hepatotoxicity (alkaline phosphatase, aspartate transaminase) were evaluated. The results were then integrated into the Integrated Biomarker Response index (IBR).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Grass carp (*Ctenopharyngodon idella*) weighing 17.08±1.01g, length of 11.8±0.44cm, were placed to glass aquaria containing 60 L of tap water. A total of 6 fish were placed in each aquarium and acclimatized for a week. fish were exposed to different concentrations of dibutyl phthalate (DBP). DBP stock solution (10mg/mL) was prepared in 80% DMSO. Desired DBP concentrations were obtained by adding an appropriate volume of stock to aquaria water. Fishes in the control group were exposed to the maximum level of DMSO used for dilution (0.5 ml/L). The experiment was conducted in duplicate.

Fishes were exposed to 1, 10, 100 and 1000µg/L for 21 days in a semi static system in duplicate. Approximately ¾ water were renewed every day with a new DBP solution. Dissolve oxygen was maintained in the aquarium by air stones provided with air pumps. All experiments were performed at room temperature (28.35±1.25ºC) and 13:11h (light: dark) photoperiod. Fish were observed for mortality and abnormal behaviour regularly during the experimental period. Fishes with abnormal swimming pattern were removed immediately.

Sample collection: After 21-days, fish were euthanized using clove oil (Latif *et al.,* 2021) according to ethic regimentation and its length and weight were recorded. Fish liver, gills and kidney were dissected and used for the biomarkers analysis. Organs were washed with chilled 0.9% saline solution to remove exogenous materials and snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen.

Organs (gills, liver and kidney) were weighed and homogenised in chilled phosphate buffer (0.1M) using a mechanical homogeniser (Scilogex D160, USA). All procedure was performed on ice. After homogenization, 1mL of the homogenate was used for the measurement of lipid peroxidation and the remaining homogenate was centrifuged for 30 min at 13,000rpm (4ºC) to get the post-mitochondrial supernatant (PMS) (Faheem and Lone, 2017; Latif *et al*., 2020).

Biochemical analysis: Lipid peroxidation was measured using the thiobarbituric acid method described by (Wright *et al.,* 1981). Tissue homogenate was mixed with an equal volume of trichloroacetic acid (TCA-10%) and thiobarbituric acid (TBA-0.67%). After incubation for 45min in a boiling water bath, the mixture was then centrifuged for 10 min. The supernatant was collected, and absorbance was recorded at 532nm on a Hitachi U-2000 spectrophotometer. Lipid peroxidation was measured using a molar extinction coefficient of 1.56 x 10^5/M/ cm and expressed as nmol TBARS/g tissue.

Glutathione was quantified using an adaption of the method from (Jollow *et al.,* 1974) as described earlier (Latif *et al.,* 2020) Briefly, PMS was incubated with an equal volume of 4% sulphosalicylic acid and incubated at 4ºC for 60 min. The mixture was centrifuged at 1200 rpm for 15 minutes (room temperature) and the supernatant was collected. To the supernatant, DNTB [5,5-dithio-bis-(2-nitrobenzoic acid)] and phosphate buffer (0.1M) were added, and absorbance read at 412nm. Reduced Glutathione content was expressed as nmol GSH/g tissue using a molar extinction coefficient of 1.36x104/M/cm.

Catalase activity (CAT) was measured using the method of (Claiborne, 1985) as explained by Faheem and Lone (2017). The reaction mixture consisted of 0.09M H_2O_2, 0.1 M phosphate buffer and PMS (10%) in a total volume of 3 ml. Change in absorbance was recorded every 30 seconds at 240nm in a double beam spectrophotometer (Hitachi U-2000). Catalase activity was expressed in terms of nmol H_2O_2 consumed/min/mg protein.

The glutathione-*S*-transferases activity was measured kinetically using 1-chloro-2,4-dinitrobenzene (CDNB) as a substrate. Briefly, the reaction mixture (2ml) containing 0.1M phosphate buffer, reduced gluthathione (GSH - 1 mM), 2,4-Dinitrochlorobenzene (CDNB - 1 mM) and PMS (10%). The change in absorbance was recorded at 340 nm, and the enzyme activity was expressed as nmol CDNB conjugates formed/min/mg protein (Faheem & Lone, 2017).

Protein content of the homogenate was quantified using Bradford reagent as described by (He, 2011) using bovine serum albumin as standard. Alanine amino-

transferase (ALT) and Aspartate aminotransferase (AST), creatinine and uric acid were quantified using the commercial kits from Randox.

Integrated biomarker response analysis: The integrated biomarker response (IBR) was calculated according to (Beliaeff and Burgeot, 2002), and can be used for field and laboratory studies (i.e. (Wang *et al.,* 2011; Morgado *et al.,* 2013; Ferreira *et al.,* 2015). Briefly, the IBR was calculated based on the score of each biomarker. The score (S) was calculated using $S=Z+|Min|$, where $S\geq 0$ and |Min| is the absolute value for the minimum value for all calculated Y in a given biomarker at all measurements made. Since the IBR is obtained by summing up all the parameters, to allow a correct and more accurate comparison, IBR was divided by the number of biomarkers and presented as IBR/n (Broeg and Lehtonen, 2006), thus allowing an overall state of organisms for each concentration and each organ. The IBR is reported as Star Plot.

Statistical analysis: Data analyses were performed using Sigmaplot (SPSS 1999). Data was checked for normality and homoscedasticity, followed by One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) or by ANOVA on ranks whenever these parameters were not met. A Tukey's Post Hoc was then used to determine statistical differences among the various exposure groups.

RESULTS

Grass carp responses to DBP are shown in Table 1. Oxidative damage in various organs of grass carp was assessed using LPO. Lipid peroxidation increased in all organs of grass carp after exposure to DBP for 21-days. The highest exposure concentrations (100 and 1000µg/L) resulted in significant increase in all organs, and gills showed a significant increase for all the treatments. Higher values of LPO were observed for gills, followed by liver and kidneys. Catalase showed significant inhibition of its activity only in kidneys for all exposure concentrations (Table 1). Higher activities of catalase were observed for liver and kidneys. Gills showed activities one magnitude lower than then other organs. As for GST, a bell-shaped response was observed. Significant inductions in its activity for liver and kidneys in 10 µg/L or higher concentration were recorded (except for liver at 1000 µg/L when the activity was dropping and reach values near the ones observed for the control). As for gills, the induction in the activity of GST was observed for the two highest concentrations (100 and 1000 µg/L). As expected, the higher activities in these enzymes were observed for the liver. Liver function biomarker ALP, showed a significant increase in exposures with DPB concentrations of 10 µg/L or higher (Table 1). As for the biomarker AST, although a bell-shaped pattern is observed, significant differences were observed only for the DBP exposure at 100 µg/L (Table 1). Creatinine also showed a bell-shaped curve with significant differences to all exposures (Table 1). Moreover, uric acid showed an increasing pattern with the increase of DBP concentrations but with significant differences only for the highest concentration (1000 µg/L – Table 1).

The integration of the previous results into the IBR index allowed a better understanding of the organism condition (Fig. 1 and 2). The IBR index that integrates all biomarkers and all tissues (Fig. 1) showed similar values for control and the lower concentration (1 µg/L). This similar score then increased up to more than 250x. A closer look also showed that some biomarkers in the lower concentration (i.e. CAT in liver and gills; GSH and ALP in the liver) have better scores than the control. As for the lowest score for GSH in gills, it was observed for the highest concentration (1000 µg/L). It is clear that the scores increased with the increase of DBP concentrations. When looking to scores of each organ (Fig. 2), the control and the lower exposure concentration (1 µg/L) appear with lower scores than the other treatments.

In order to be able also to perform a direct comparison (due to the different number of integrated biomarkers: six for kidney and liver, four for gills) the IBR/n was used. This index showed similar patterns to the ones observed for IBR for what reports the increasing scores with the increase of concentrations. Nonetheless, when looking to the IBR/n of liver and gills when exposed to 10 and 1000 µg/L, the scores are more similar when compared to the IBR scores.

Table 1: Average values of lipid peroxidation, antioxidant enzymes, ALT, AST, Creatinine and uric acid in different organs of grass carp exposed to DBP for 21 days. Results of ANOVA and Tukey's post hoc test. *= P<0.05

Biomarker	Organ/tissue	Control	1µg/l DBP	10µg/l DBP	100µg/l DBP	1000µg/l DBP
Lipid peroxidation	liver	30.84±5.21	56.51±5.68	59.90±8.65	73.03±6.88*	101.1±15.45*
(nmol TBARS /g tissue)	Gills	21.57± 6.24	84.01±23.56*	114.7±11.46*	90.73±12.08*	106.8±23.00*
	kidney	34.72±7.15	47.93±8.86	44.25±10.51	66.79±4.01*	88.17±5.19*
Catalase	liver	0.3433±0.05	0.4947±0.12	0.3402±0.09	0.1142±0.07	0.04637±0.01
	Gills	0.06564±0.03	0.06649±0.02	0.03743±0.01	0.06352±0.02	0.02308±0.009
	Kidney	0.3151±0.04	0.1518±0.01*	0.1110±0.03*	0.1536±0.02*	0.06902±0.02*
Reduced Glutathione	Liver	5.760±1.37	5.201±0.98	1.434±0.42*	3.109±0.87	1.122±0.24*
	Gills	2.998±0.35	4.113±0.57	1.734±0.09	1.158±0.32*	1.040±0.13*
	Kidney	17.26±3.68	10.81±4.0	5.021±1.67*	1.845±0.33*	1.621±0.33*
Glutathione-S-	Liver	75.18±9.42	123.4±23.09	163.4±15.60*	184.5±18.97*	88.20±10.74
transferases	Gills	50.50±7.13	43.12±3.15	69.86±6.65	74.74±7.06*	72.28±6.37*
	Kidney	69.12±15.73	26.58±4.13	34.67±2.05*	61.68±5.20*	23.70±2.95*
ALP (U/L)	Liver	44.79±6.553	40.48±6.557	317.7±64.78*	186.0±40.17*	363.8±24.05*
AST (U/L)		16.66±4.87	30.46±10.08	55.75±14.42	141.3±6.98*	61.88±24.30
Creatinine (mg/dl)	kidney	0.5202±0.04	1.104±0.166*	1.337±0.07*	1.387±0.14*	0.9619±0.14*
Uric acid (mg/dl)		6.680±0.24	6.880±0.75	9.880±0.43	9.040±0.86	13.12±0.43*

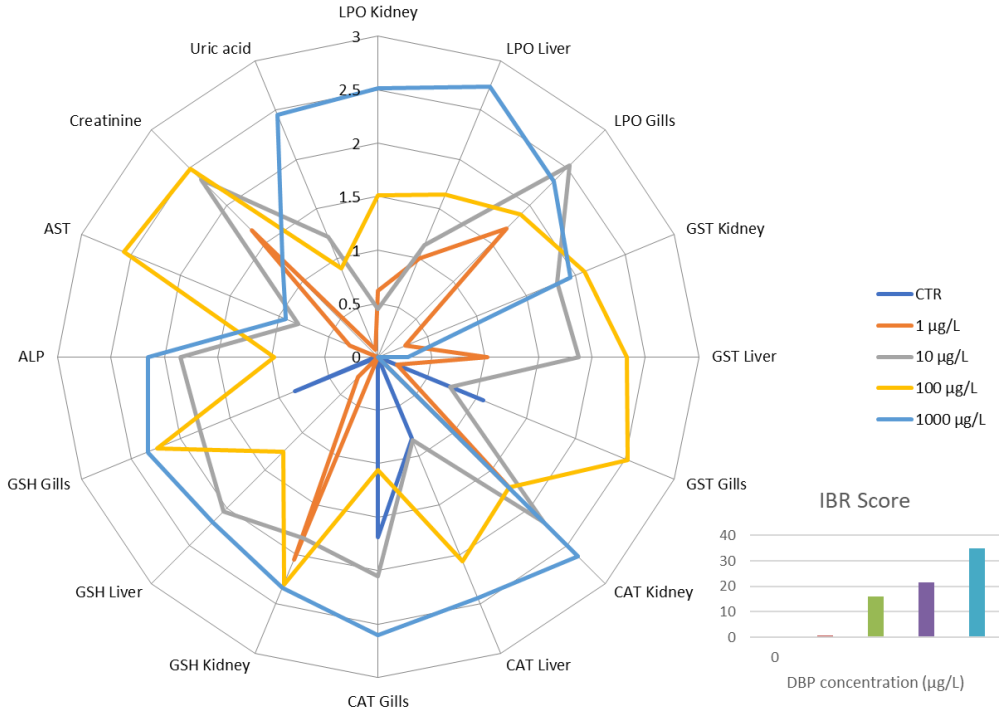

Fig. 1: Integrated biomarker response (IBR) represented by star plot and histogram of grass carp (Ctenopharyngodon idella) exposed to different concentrations of DBP. LPO-Lipid peroxidation; GST-glutathione-S-transferases; CAT-catalase; GSH-reduced glutathione; ALP-Alanine aminotransferase; AST-Aspartate aminotransferase.

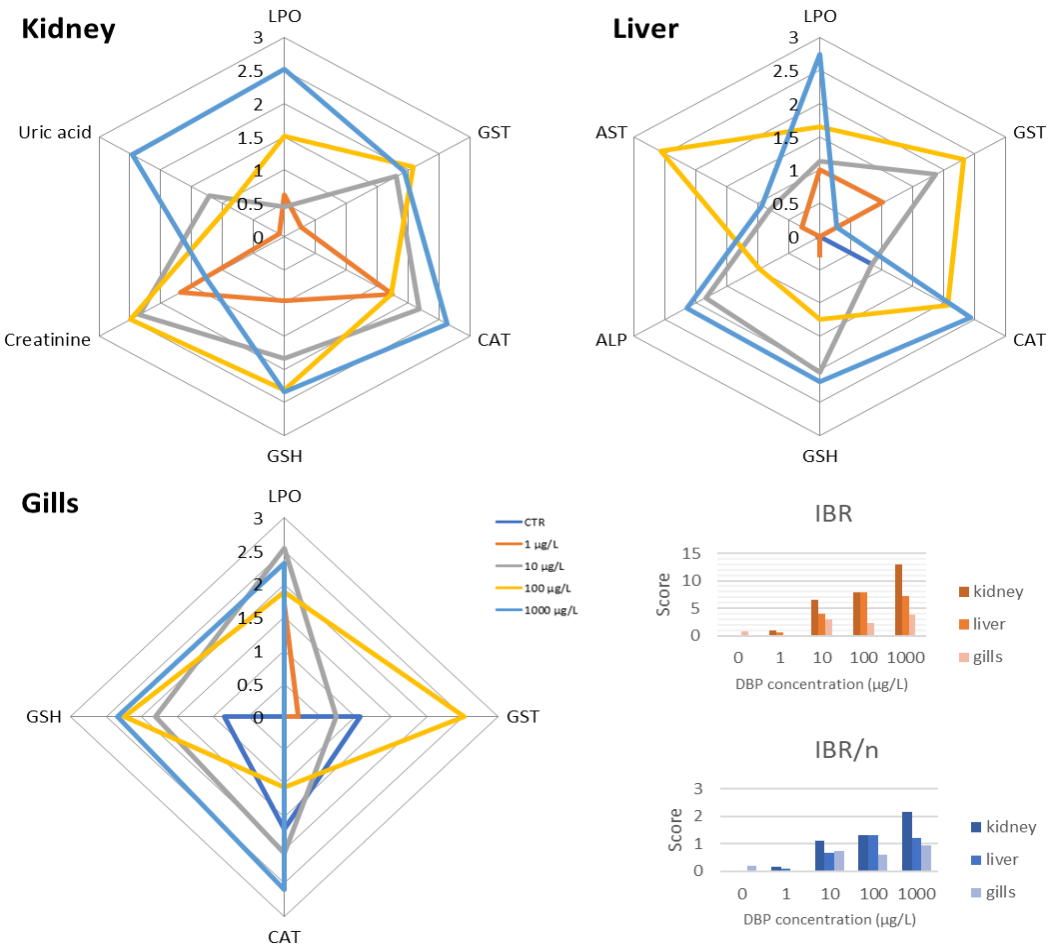

Fig. 2: Integrated biomarker response (IBR) and Integrated biomarker response per biomarker (IBR/n) of the different organs (kidney, liver and gills) represented by star plot and histograms of grass carp (Ctenopharyngodon idella) exposed to different concentrations of DBP. LPO- Lipid peroxidation; GST-glutathione-S-transferases; CAT-catalase; GSH-reduced glutathione; ALP-Alanine aminotransferase; AST-Aspartate aminotransferase.

DISCUSSION

Exposure biomarkers can reflect the early biological response after exposure to contaminant and have been used widely in laboratory and field studies (Hook *et al.,* 2016). Integration of data obtained from biomarker response of tissues, exposure chemicals and concentrations is an easier way to interpret and comprehend data (Beliaeff and Burgeot, 2002). In this study, juvenile grass carps were exposed to graded concentrations of di-butyl phthalate and its effect were evaluated using biomarkers in vital organs (liver, gills and kidney). Although the most of concentrations of DBP to which the fishes were exposed are higher than the maximum found in literature in waters (3.1 µg/L - Vethaak *et al.,* 2005), the high persistence of these pollutants and resuspension from sediments (30.3 µg/L - Yuan *et al.,* 2002) may lead to higher concentrations. Nonetheless it is also important to highlight that to understand the impact of pollutants ecotoxicological assays use higher concentrations to have a full description of their toxicity.

Lipid peroxidation is a biomarker of oxidative stress, commonly used in ecotoxicological studies (van der Oost *et al.,* 2003; Carvalho *et al.,* 2012; Faheem and Lone 2017; Ghisi *et al.,* 2017). LPO results from free radicals and reactive oxygen species that react with membrane lipids (Regoli and Giuliani, 2014). Whenever antioxidant defences cannot handle oxidative stress from reactive oxygen species (ROS), damage can be assessed using this biomarker. In this study, it is possible to observe an increase in LPO rates in all organs with the increase of DBP concentrations. Gills was the most sensitive organ to respond, showing an induction in LPO rates even at 1 µg/L, followed by liver (the organ were the detoxifications processes are expected to be more intensive and finally the kidneys, the excretory organ. These results are not unexpected, as gills are the first organ to be in contract with DBP an after the biotransformation in liver should affect in a lesser level the kidneys. Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) showed similar levels of LPO between the gills and liver when exposed to DBP (Erkmen *et al.,* 2015). LPO rates increased in most fish species after exposure to different phthalates (e.g. (Kang *et al.,* 2010; Mankidy *et al.,* 2013; Xu *et al.,* 2013b).

The previously observed damage (evidenced by the LPO rates) is in accordance with the GST activities. GST is an important biomarker of exposure and is involved in the detoxification of xenobiotics (Regoli and Giuliani, 2014). In the liver and kidney, the enzymes show a bell-shaped pattern. The pattern is typical for enzymatic activity curves, where at high concentrations, the enzyme is inhibited and may even reach values below the control. These patterns are observed for phthalates (Latif *et al.,* 2020) but also for other xenobiotics (e.g.(Ferreira *et al.,* 2015).

Reduced glutathione is involved in vital aspects of cellular homeostasis (Pompella *et al.,* 2003) and is essential in detoxification processes. A decrease in reduced glutathione content was recorded in gills of Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) exposed to DBP for 96 hours (Erkmen *et al.,* 2015). On the contrary, an increase in GSH levels was recorded in Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) exposed to 590 and 1180 µg/L DBP for eight weeks (Abu Zeid and Khalil, 2015). Still, the observed differences may result from the extensive exposure period that could result in the inactivity of enzymes that use GSH as a substrate. In the present study, apart from small exceptions, GSH levels can be directly connected with GST activity. For example, in the kidney, GSH showed a decreasing pattern with a significant difference from concentrations of 10 µg/L onward, that can be a result of its consumption for GST detoxification processes. These patterns of increase GST activity and decrease GSH can be seen for all the three sampled organs.

Catalase, along with other antioxidants, protects the cellular components from damage (Costa-Silva *et al.,* 2015). When reporting to CAT activity in kidneys, significant decreases can be observed in all concentrations. Still, in all other tissues, no significant differences are observed, although a decreasing pattern can be noticed for the liver.

To determine liver damage, the biomarkers ALP and AST were assessed. For ALP, results showed a significant increase for all DBP concentrations except 1 µg/L. As for AST, a bell-shaped pattern is again observed. Still, only the concentration 100 µg/L showed a significant increase when compared to the control. Similarly, the kidney damage biomarkers creatinine and uric acid also show an impact on their levels. Creatinine shows a bell-shaped curve with a significant increase in its levels for all the exposure concentrations except 1000 µg/L. As for uric acid, the levels show an increasing pattern with the increase of DBP concentrations, although significant differences can only be observed for the highest concentration. An increase in AST and ALP were also observed in various fish species exposed to DBP and other phthalates (Mehta *et al.,* 2003; Kang *et al.,* 2010; Latif *et al.,* 2020).

The IBR index helped to explain and understand the results described previously. It is noticeable that when all the biomarkers measured in all organs are integrated even within realistic environmental concentrations (1 and 10 µg/L), where up to >110x increase in the score was observed. Similarly, even the comparison between the control and 1 µg/L, showed a 4.7x increase in the score. The integration of the data into the IBR and IBR/n index also showed another interesting result. It is routinely expected that liver is most effected organ after the exposure to toxicant but interestingly, IBR/n result showed that kidneys are most impacted after exposure to DBP.

Conclusions: The impact of phthalates is an important topic that needs to be addressed urgently, and that still needs more information. This study highlights that need by showing the effects of DBP in a freshwater fish species (*Ctenopharyngodon idella*) and most importantly how the general idea that liver, the detoxification organ or gills would be the most impacted organs do not seem to be true for DBP when biomarkers data is integrated into the IBR/n index. As so, this opens the doors for studies that should focus for example on the mechanistic pathways and genes variation on these organs or even the cellular aspect of their specific cellular structure.

Acknowledgements: This research work was supported by ORIC, GCU. Nuno Ferreira was funded through a Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellowship (H2020-CoFund, SIRCIW>MINT) supported by European Union, Welsh Government and Cardiff University.

Authors contribution: ZZ performed all experimental work under supervision of MF. NGCF performed all data analysis.

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