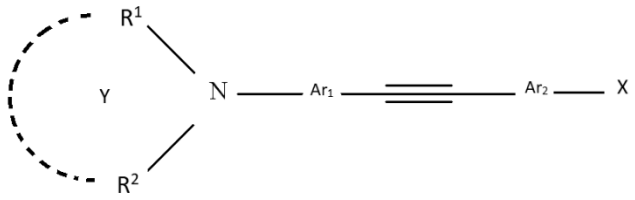
Claims:

1. A compound of formula I:



I

in which:

R^1 is H or an alkyl group comprising from 1 to 10 carbon atoms, optionally substituted with one or more N atoms, and R^2 is selected from an alkyl group comprising from 1 to 10 carbon atoms, optionally substituted with one or more N atoms, $-(CH_2)_nR^3$, $-(CH_2)_nNHR^3$, and $-(CH_2)_2(COCH_2)_nR^3$ in which n is an integer from 1 to 10 and R^3 is $-NH_2$, -OH, $-SO_2PhCH_3$, or -COOH, or R^2 is $-C(O)(CH_2)_nC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_mO(CH_2)_mC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_nCH(CH_3)C(O)R^8$, $-S(O)_2(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$, $-S^+(O^-)(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$ or $-(CH_2)_nPPh_3^+Br^-$, in which R^8 is -OH or -NHOH, n is an integer from 1 to 8, and m is an integer from 1 to 4; or

R^1 and R^2 form part of a heterocyclic group Y having from 3 to 12 ring members;

Ar_1 and Ar_2 are each, independently, an aromatic group; and

X is selected from unsaturated esters, ketones, carboxylic acids, imidazolones, pyridines, oxazolones, oxazolidinones, barbituric acids and thiobarbituric acids;

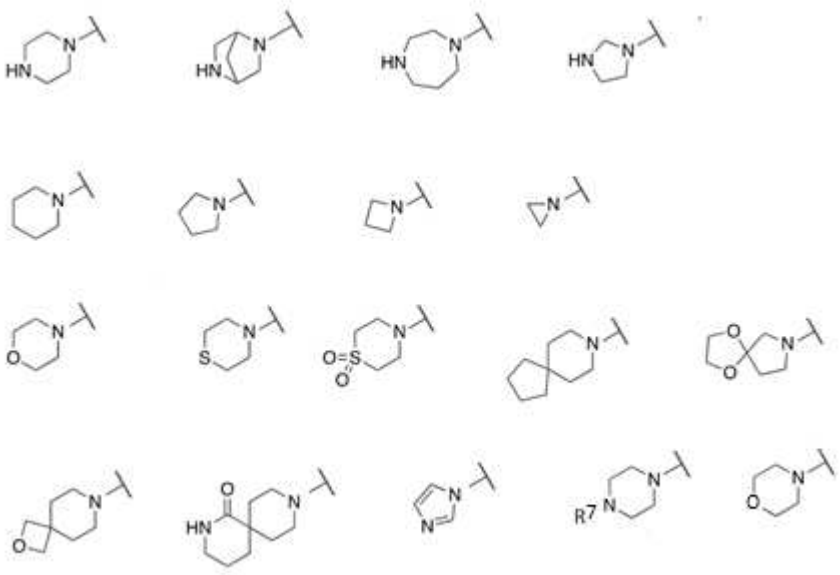
with the proviso that when Ar_1 is phenyl and R^1 and R^2 form part of a heterocyclic group Y having from 3 to 12 ring members, the N of the heterocyclic group is in a para position relative to the acetylene group of the compound of formula I;

and diastereoisomers thereof,

in free or salt form.

2. A compound of formula I as claimed in claim 1 in which R^1 and R^2 form part of heterocyclic ring group Y.

3. A compound of formula I as claimed in claim 2, in which heterocyclic ring group Y is selected from:

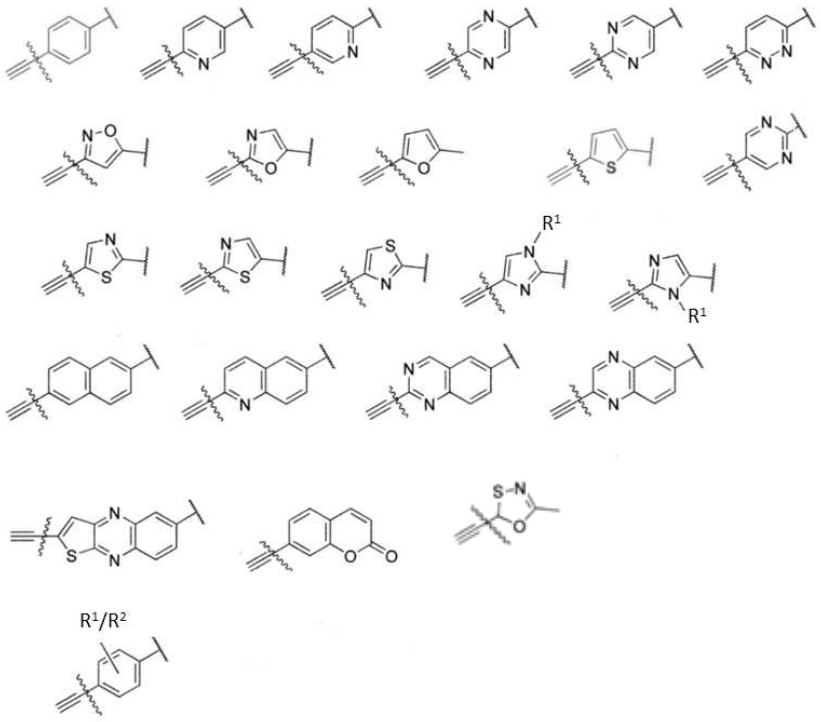


In which R^7 is an alkyl group, $-COCH_3$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_nC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_mO(CH_2)_mC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_nCH(CH_3)C(O)R^8$, $-S(O)_2(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$, $-S^+(O^-)(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$ or $-(CH_2)_nPPh_3^+Br^-$, in which R^8 is -OH or -NHOH, n is an integer from 1 to 8, and m is an integer from 1 to 4.

4. A compound of formula I as claimed in claim 1, in which R^1 is H or an alkyl group comprising from 1 to 10 carbon atoms, and R^2 is selected from $-(CH_2)_nR^3$ and $-(CH_2)_2(COCH_2)_nR^3$ in which n is an integer from 1 to 10 and R^3 is $-NH_2$, -OH or -COOH, or R^2 is $-C(O)(CH_2)_nC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_mO(CH_2)_mC(O)R^8$, $-C(O)(CH_2)_nCH(CH_3)C(O)R^8$, $-S(O)_2(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$, $-S^+(O^-)(CH_2)_nC(=O)R^8$ or $-(CH_2)_nPPh_3^+Br^-$, in which R^8 is -OH or -NHOH, n is an integer from 1 to 8, and m is an integer from 1 to 4.

5. A compound as claimed in any preceding claim, in which Ar_1 is selected from a phenyl, pyridine, pyrimidine, thiophene, furan, benzofuran or thiazole group.

6. A compound as claimed in claim any preceding claim, in which Ar_2 is selected from:



in which R^1 and R^2 are as defined in claim 1.

7. A compound of formula I for use in fluorescence imaging.

8. A compound of formula I for use in Raman imaging.

9. A probe comprising a compound of formula I.

10. A conjugate comprising a compound of formula I and a targeting or active agent.

11. A conjugate as claimed in claim 10, wherein the targeting or active agent is selected from a small molecule drug, peptide or protein, saccharide or polysaccharide, aptamer or affimer, or antibody.

12. A compound of formula I as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6 or a conjugate thereof as claimed in claim 10 or claim 11, for use in the control of cellular development.

13. A compound of formula I as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6 or a conjugate thereof as claimed in claim 10 or claim 11, for use in photodynamic therapy.

14. A pharmaceutical composition comprising a compound of formula I as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6 or a conjugate thereof as claimed in claim 10 or claim 11, optionally in combination with one or more pharmaceutically acceptable excipients, diluents or carriers.

15. A formulation comprising a compound of formula I as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6 or a conjugate thereof as claimed in claim 10 or claim 11, optionally in combination with one or more co-formulants.

16. Use of a compound of formula I or a conjugate thereof in the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment of a disease or condition that benefits from the control of cell proliferation, differentiation or apoptosis.

17. Use of a compound of formula I in fluorescence imaging, Raman imaging or fluoRaman imaging.