Analytica Chimica Acta 1109 (2020) 37-43



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Analytica Chimica Acta

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/aca

# Visualizing hydrogen sulfide in living cells and zebrafish using a redemitting fluorescent probe via selenium-sulfur exchange reaction



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Two red-emitting fluorescent probes SNARF-SSPv and SNARF-SeSPv have been designed for efficient detection of H<sub>2</sub>S.
- By comparing the two probes, only SNARF-SeSPy exhibited excellent anti-interference even in the presence of high concentration of thiols.
- Results of imaging H<sub>2</sub>S in living cells and zebrafish demonstrated that SNARF-SeSPy could be employed to track exogenous and endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S in vitro and in vivo.

### ARTICLE INFO

Article history: Received 11 January 2020 Received in revised form 12 February 2020 Accepted 17 February 2020 Available online 27 February 2020

Keywords: Hydrogen sulfide Fluorescent probes Red emission

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# GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



# ABSTRACT

Hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) is an important endogenous gasotransmitter and has been implicated with a variety of biological processes. The development of an efficient method for monitor H<sub>2</sub>S fluctuations in biological systems is of great significance to understand its roles in physiological and pathological conditions. In this work, two red-emitting fluorescent probes SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy for H<sub>2</sub>S detection with turn-on fluorescence signals were reported. Interestingly, SNARF-SeSPy exhibited excellent anti-interference via dual selenium-sulfur exchange reaction even in the presence of high concentrations of thiols, whereas SNARF-SSPy did not sense H<sub>2</sub>S in the same condition. Additionally, in the present of H<sub>2</sub>S, SNARF-SeSPy showed a rapid response and excellent sensitivity with a detection limit of

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Cell imaging In vivo imaging 34 nM. Most importantly, SNARF-SeSPy featured low cytotoxicity and could be employed to detect and image exogenous/endogenous  $H_2S$  in living cells and zebrafish.

#### 1. Introduction

Hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) is widely known as a colorless, toxic gas with rotten egg smell in the past decades. However, H<sub>2</sub>S is recently classified as an important gaseous signaling molecule following carbon monoxide (CO) and nitric oxide (NO) [1-4]. Increasing evidences suggest H<sub>2</sub>S appears to have protective effects in a diverse array of pathologies, such as anti-inflammation, anti-oxidative stress, regulation of blood pressure and cardiovascular protection [5–8]. Recent studies also confirm endogenous production of H<sub>2</sub>S is mainly from enzymes-catalyzed desulfhydration reaction of cysteine and homocysteine in various cell types. These enzymes include cystathionine- $\beta$ -synthase, cystathionine- $\gamma$ -lyase, 3mercapto-sulfurtransferase and cysteine aminotransferase [9–14]. Early literatures report that the whole blood amounts of H<sub>2</sub>S is in the range of  $35-80 \,\mu\text{M}$  [15], as well as the level variations of H<sub>2</sub>S are closely correlated with many human diseases such as Alzheimer's disease [16,17] and Down's syndrome [18]. Hence, there is a highly desirable and keen interest in developing efficient methods for real-time tracking the level fluctuation of H<sub>2</sub>S and determining its roles in various biological processes.

Several common methods including methylene blue assay [19], gas chromatography-mass spectrometry analysis [20] and sulfide ion-specific electrode [8], have been proposed for H<sub>2</sub>S determination in various samples, but these methods can't in situ detect H<sub>2</sub>S at the cellular level or in vivo. Fluorescent probes show great potential for solving this issue owing to the high spatiotemporal resolution and good biocompatibility [21–25]. More recently, different strategies including H<sub>2</sub>S-mediated nucleophilic addition [26–33]. H<sub>2</sub>S-mediated thiolysis [34–38]. H<sub>2</sub>S-mediated reduction of azide and nitro group [39,40] have been exploited to design H<sub>2</sub>S probes. Nevertheless, all these strategies are based on the high nucleophilicity and reductibility of H<sub>2</sub>S, which will make the developed probes susceptible to interference from other nucleophilic or reduced species under physiological conditions. For example, many H<sub>2</sub>S-specific probes containing disulfide linkage have been recently designed, but the main disadvantage of these probes is that they are easily consumed by biothios in vivo, which could cause a decrease in sensitivity of these probes [27-29,31,32]. Consequently, the development of highly selective and sensitive probes for H<sub>2</sub>S detection remains challenging.

To solve this problem, we herein designed and synthesized two reaction-based red-emitting probes SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy for  $H_2S$  specific detection. These two probes displayed off-on fluorescence response to  $H_2S$  by utilizing an  $H_2S$ -triggered cascade nucleophilic reaction to release the fluorophore SNARF. Interestingly, by comparing SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy, we found only the fluorescence of SNARF-SeSPy enhanced significantly in the coexistence of high concentrations of thiols. We reasoned that selenium was easier attacked by  $H_2S$  than sulfur due to its high electrophilicity, which made SNARF-SeSPy capable of releasing the fluorophore SNARF via dual selenium-sulfur exchange reaction to achieve fluorescence enhancement. Furthermore, SNARF-SeSPy was successfully applied for monitoring exogenous/endogenous  $H_2S$  in living cells and zebrafish, which provided a powerful tool for studying the function of  $H_2S$  in living systems.

## 2. Experimental section

## 2.1. General information

All the reagents and solvents in this work were purchased from commercial suppliers and used without further purification. Ultrapure water (18.2 M $\Omega \cdot cm$ ) was used for all spectral analysis. <sup>1</sup>H NMR and <sup>13</sup>C NMR spectra were recorded by a Varian 600 MHz spectrometer with TMS as an internal standard. MS data (ESI) was obtained on an Agilent 1260–6224 LC/MS. Absorption spectra were acquired in a Shimadzu UV-2700 spectrophotometer. Fluorescence spectra were measured on an Agilent cary eclipse spectrophotometer.

## 2.2. General procedure for spectra measurement

The stock solutions of two probes (2 mM) were prepared in dimethyl sulfoxide. Analyte stock solutions (10 mM) of methionine (Met), glycine (Gly), Arginine (Arg), proline (Pro), cysteine (Cys), homocysteine (Hcy), glutathione (GSH), Na<sub>2</sub>S·9H<sub>2</sub>O (H<sub>2</sub>S), Na<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub><sup>--</sup>), Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub> (SO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup>), Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> (SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup>), NaCl (Cl<sup>--</sup>), NaClO (ClO<sup>--</sup>), MgSO<sub>4</sub> (Mg<sup>2+</sup>), Al(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub> (Al<sup>3+</sup>), Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (Ca<sup>2+</sup>), Fe(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub> (Fe<sup>3+</sup>) were prepared in freshly 50 mM PBS buffer. The stock solution of cetrimonium bromide (CTAB, 10 mM) was prepared in ethanol. 30 µl of stock solution of CTAB, 15 µl of stock solution of probe and appropriate volume of analyte stock solution were added into PBS buffer (50 mM, pH 7.4) to give a final volume being 3 ml. The fluorescence excitation wavelength was 580 nm with excitation and emission slits of 5 nm.

# 2.3. Fluorescence imaging in live cells

A549 cells were cultured in Dulbecco's modified eagle's medium (DMEM) medium supplemented with 10% (v/v) fetal bovine serum and 1% (v/v) penicillin-streptomycin at 37 °C in an atmosphere containing 5% carbon dioxide. The cells were seeded in a 12-well plate for 24 h. The cells were incubated with different concentrations of H<sub>2</sub>S (0, 50, 100  $\mu$ M) in PBS buffer (pH 7.4, containing 50  $\mu$ M CTAB) for 30 min followed by incubation with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min. In vivo cell imaging experiment, the cells pretreated with 20  $\mu$ M of sodium nitroprusside dehydrate (SNP) for 30 min were incubated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min. The cell images were taken by an inverted fluorescence microscope (Olympus IX71, Japan) after the cells were washed three times with PBS buffer.

## 2.4. Fluorescence imaging in zebrafish

The zebrafish post-fertilization was purchased from Eze-Rinka Company (Nanjing, China). Then the zebrafish were cultured in 10 ml of embryonic medium supplemented with 1-phenyl-2-thiourea in a beaker at 30 °C for 96 h. The zebrafish were incubated with different concentrations of H<sub>2</sub>S (0, 100, 200  $\mu$ M) for 30 min followed by incubation with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min. Next, the zebrafish pretreated with 100  $\mu$ M of SNP for 30 min were incubated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min. The zebrafish were washed three times with PBS buffer prior to

fluorescence imaging. All fluorescence images were obtained on a stereomicroscope (Olympus SZX16, Japan).

## 2.5. Synthesis of SNARF-SSPy

A mixture of SNARF (131 mg, 0.3 mmol, 1 equiv.), compound 1 (94 mg, 0.36 mmol, 1.2 equiv.), 1-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-3ethylcarbodiimide hydrochloride (115 mg, 0.6 mmol, 2 equiv.) and 4-dimethylaminopyridine (36.6 mg, 0.3 mmol, 1equiv.) in 10 ml methylene chloride was stirred at room temperature under Argon. The reaction was monitored with TLC. After the reaction was completed, methylene chloride was evaporated followed by column chromatography on silica gel using ethyl acetate/hexane = 1/3to give the desired product as a red solid (105 mg, yield 51%). SNARF-SSPy <sup>1</sup>H NMR (600 MHz, CDCl<sub>3</sub>):  $\delta$  8.69 (d, J = 9.0 Hz, 1H), 8.48 (d, J = 4.6 Hz, 1H), 8.36 (d, J = 7.9 Hz, 1H), 8.05 (d, J = 7.6 Hz, 1H), 8.01 (d, J = 8.1 Hz, 1H), 7.72 (s, 1H), 7.67–7.54 (m, 6H), 7.42 (d, J = 8.8 Hz, 1H), 7.37 (d, J = 7.6 Hz, 1H), 7.18 (d, J = 7.6 Hz, 1H), 7.10–7.09 (m, 1H), 6.81 (d, J = 8.7 Hz, 1H), 6.68–6.66 (m, 2H), 6.45-6.44 (m, 1H), 3.41 (q, J = 7.0 Hz, 4H), 1.22 (t, J = 7.0 Hz, 6H);  $^{13}$ C NMR (150 MHz, CDCl<sub>3</sub>): δ 169.67, 164.74, 158.87, 153.58, 152.36, 149.78, 149.60, 147.46, 141.54, 137.30, 134.97, 134.89, 133.87, 132.06, 129.53, 128.92, 126.95, 126.25, 126.11, 125.88, 125.21, 124.87, 124.29, 124.05, 122.62, 122.10, 121.34, 121.01, 119.73, 118.73, 112.90, 108.96, 97.72, 44.50, 12.51; LC-MS m/z: C<sub>40</sub>H<sub>30</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>S<sub>2</sub> [M+H]<sup>+</sup> calcd for 683.1674 found 683.1827.

#### 2.6. Synthesis of SNARF-SeSPy

A mixture of SNARF (219 mg, 0.5 mmol, 1 equiv.), compound 2 (187 mg, 0.6 mmol, 1.2 equiv.), 1-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-3ethylcarbodiimide hydrochloride (191 mg, 1 mmol, 2 equiv.) and 4-dimethylaminopyridine (61 mg, 0.5 mmol, 1equiv.) in 15 ml methylene chloride was stirred at room temperature under Argon. The reaction was monitored with TLC. After the reaction was completed, methylene chloride was evaporated followed by column chromatography on silica gel using ethyl acetate/hexane = 1/3to give the desired product as a red solid (85 mg, yield 23%). SNARF-SeSPy <sup>1</sup>H NMR (600 MHz, CDCl<sub>3</sub>):  $\delta$  8.70 (d, J = 9.1 Hz, 1H), 8.44–8.43 (m, 1H), 8.39 (d, J = 7.7 Hz, 1H), 8.13 (d, J = 8.2 Hz, 1H), 8.05 (d, J = 7.6 Hz, 1H), 7.70 (s, 1H), 7.65 (t, J = 7.4 Hz, 1H), 7.61 (t, J = 7.4 Hz, 1H), 7.57–7.50 (m, 4H), 7.43–7.39 (m, 2H), 7.17 (d, J = 7.6 Hz, 1H), 7.04–7.02 (m, 1H), 6.81 (d, J = 8.6 Hz, 1H), 6.67–6.65 (m, 2H), 6.41 (d, J = 8.9 Hz, 1H), 3.40 (q, J = 7.0 Hz, 4H), 1.21 (t, J = 7.1 Hz, 6H); <sup>13</sup>C NMR (150 MHz, CDCl<sub>3</sub>):  $\delta$  169.67, 166.20, 158.35, 153.60, 152.35, 149.69, 149.57, 149.52, 147.46, 138.87, 137.14, 134.92, 134.89, 134.23, 131.99, 129.51, 128.88, 127.84, 126.93, 126.48, 126.33, 125.31, 124.85, 124.40, 124.02, 122.58, 122.19, 121.73, 121.16, 120.65, 118.68, 113.00, 108.93, 104.91, 97.65, 84.19, 44.45, 12.53; LC-MS m/z:  $C_{40}H_{30}N_2O_5SSe [M+H]^+$  calcd for 731.1119 found 731.1173.

# 3. Results and discussion

## 3.1. Probe design

The synthetic strategy of SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy was illustrated in Fig. S1. The structures of SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy were confirmed by <sup>1</sup>HNMR, <sup>13</sup>CNMR and MS (Fig. S2-S7). Compared with short-wavelength fluorophore, semi-naphthorhodafluor (SNARF) with long-wavelength (>600 nm) was available for fluorescence imaging because of its merits of the decrease tissue autofluorescence and photodamage [41–45]. In this design, we synthesized two fluorescent probes SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy, in which pyridyl disulfide (–SSPy) and pyridyl selenenyl sulfide (–SeSPy) were incorporated on SNARF by an ester

linker, respectively. As depicted in Scheme 1, both SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy could undergo tandem nucleophilic reaction to release the red-emitting SNARF fluorophore. Nevertheless, when high concentration thiols were present, SNARF-SSPy containing disulfide (–S-S-) linkage only underwent the first nucleophilic substitution to form intermediate A. SNARF-SeSPy containing selenenyl sulfide (–Se-S-) linkage could first react with thiols to obtain intermediate B, followed by reaction with H<sub>2</sub>S to give –Se-SH intermediate C and finally underwent the intramolecular cyclization to release a ring-opening fluorophore SNARF. The major reaction products of SNARF-SeSPy with H<sub>2</sub>S were identified as the fluorophore SNARF and cyclic acyl selenylsulfides by ESI-MS analysis (Fig. S8).

#### 3.2. Spectral response of the designed probes

The anti-interference ability is essential for the bioimaging application of the designed fluorescent probes. With the two probes SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy in hand, we first compared the selectivity of two probes SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy in the presence of potential biorelevant species. As depicted in Fig. 1A, not only common amino acids (Met, Gly, Arg, Pro, Cys, Hcy, GSH) but also anions  $(S_2O_3^{2-}, SO_3^{2-}, SO_4^{2-}, Cl^-, ClO^-)$  and cations  $(Mg^{2+}, Al^{3+}, Cl^{-}, ClO^-)$ Ca<sup>2+</sup>, Fe<sup>3+</sup>) showed no to little fluorescence off-on response. When SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy were treated with H<sub>2</sub>S (using Na<sub>2</sub>S as an equivalent), drastic increases in fluorescence were observed, which demonstrated that the two probes could serve as candidates for H<sub>2</sub>S detection. However, when we treated the two probes with high concentration of thiols (Cvs. Hcv. GSH) and H<sub>2</sub>S. SNARF-SSPv showed negligible fluorescence change while SNARF-SeSPy induced a significant fluorescence increase. The results indicated that SNARF-SeSPy could detect H<sub>2</sub>S in the biological thiols pool and exhibited better anti-interference than most of the reported H<sub>2</sub>S probes (Table S1). We speculated that the reason for this test results was that the reactivity of intermediate B with H<sub>2</sub>S was much higher than that of intermediate A. Meanwhile, the color of the two probes solution changes in the presence of thiols and H<sub>2</sub>S were also displayed in Fig. 1A. After addition of thiols and H<sub>2</sub>S, SNARF-SeSPy compared with SNARF-SSPy was still capable of visual detecting H<sub>2</sub>S under room light and 365 UV light. These findings demonstrated the -Se-S- linkage introduced in the designed H<sub>2</sub>S probe enabled to effectively avoid the consumption by thiols and had the potential for application in bioimaging.

Next, we examined the ability of SNARF-SeSPy to respond H<sub>2</sub>S by absorption and emission spectra. As expected, the free probe was weakly absorbance and fluorescence owing to ring-closed spirolactam form of SNARF. After the addition of a range of different concentrations of H<sub>2</sub>S to the probe solution, the major absorption peaks emerged at 572 nm gradually increased and a pronounced fluorescence enhancement at 635 nm was obtained. which were attributed to ring-opening form of SNARF (Fig. 1B and 1C). An excellent linear relationship resided between fluorescence intensities at 635 nm and  $H_2S$  concentrations ranging from 0  $\mu M$  to 20  $\mu$ M. According to the equation (F<sub>635 nm</sub> = 39.28  $\times$  [Na<sub>2</sub>S]  $\mu$ M -48.06, r = 0.9957), the detection limit (LOD =  $3\sigma/k$ ) of SNARF to H<sub>2</sub>S was estimated to be 34 nM, which suggested SNARF-SeSPy was capable of sensitively detecting H<sub>2</sub>S in vitro. Subsequently, the reaction kinetics of SNARF-SeSPy for H<sub>2</sub>S was investigated. As can be seen from Fig. 1D, the fluorescence intensity at 635 nm of free probe remained approximately constant. In contrast, the addition of H<sub>2</sub>S triggered a significant fluorescence enhancement, as well as the fluorescence intensity achieved an approximate maximum value within 20 min, implying that SNARF-SeSPy was a fast fluorescent light-up probe for H<sub>2</sub>S and suitable for bioimaging. Similarly, the reaction between SNARF-SSPy and H<sub>2</sub>S was also completed within



Scheme 1. Sensing mechanism of SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy toward H<sub>2</sub>S.



**Fig. 1.** (A) The selectivity of SNARF-SSPy and SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) toward potential biorelevant species. From left to right: probe alone; Met (200  $\mu$ M), Gly (200  $\mu$ M), Arg (200  $\mu$ M), Pro (200  $\mu$ M), S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub><sup>--</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), SO<sub>3</sub><sup>--</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), SO<sub>4</sub><sup>--</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Cl<sup>--</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Mg<sup>2+</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Al<sup>3+</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Ca<sup>2+</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Fe<sup>3+</sup> (100  $\mu$ M), Cys (1 mM), Hcy (200  $\mu$ M), GSH (1 mM), Ng<sub>2</sub>S (50  $\mu$ M), Na<sub>2</sub>S (50  $\mu$ M), Inset: photograph of the two probes SNARF-SeSPy (1–4)/ SNARF-SSPY (5–8) in the presence of 1 mM Cys + 50  $\mu$ M Na<sub>2</sub>S (1, 5), 200  $\mu$ M Hcy + 50  $\mu$ M Na<sub>2</sub>S (2, 6), 1 mM GSH + 50  $\mu$ M Na<sub>2</sub>S (3, 7), 50  $\mu$ M Na<sub>2</sub>S (4, 8) under room light (top row) or 365 nm UV light (second row). (B) UV–vis absorption spectra of SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) upon gradual addition. Inset: plot of 0  $\mu$ M. (C) Fluorescence titration graph of SNARF-SeSPy upon treatment with Na<sub>2</sub>S from 0 to 20  $\mu$ M. Each spectrum was recorded 20 min post Na<sub>2</sub>S addition. Inset: plot of the fluorescence intensities at 635 nm of SNARF-SeSPy versus Na<sub>2</sub>S concentrations. (D) Time-dependent fluorescence measures of SNARF-SeSPy after the addition of 50  $\mu$ M of Na<sub>2</sub>S.

5 min (Fig. S9). We also evaluated the sensing properties of the probe for  $H_2S$  at different pH values (Fig. S10). The fluorescence of SNARF-SeSPy was very weak and stable over a pH range of 3–10. When  $H_2S$  was added to the probe solution, the fluorescence was

significantly enhanced in the pH range of 6-10. These results revealed that SNARF-SeSPy could be applied for H<sub>2</sub>S detection in physiological condition.



**Fig. 2.** (A) Fluorescence images of A549 cells.  $(A_1-A_3)$  The cells was stained with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min;  $(B_1-B_3)$  the cells pretreated with  $Na_2S$  (50  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min;  $(C_1-C_3)$  the cells pretreated with  $Na_2S$  (100  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min;  $(D_1-D_3)$  the cells pretreated with  $Na_2S$  (100  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min;  $(D_1-D_3)$  the cells pretreated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min;  $(D_1-D_3)$  the cells pretreated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min ( $A_1$ ,  $B_1$ ,  $C_1$ ,  $D_1$ ) brightfield image; ( $A_2$ ,  $B_2$ ,  $C_2$ ,  $D_2$ ) red channel; ( $A_3$ ,  $B_3$ ,  $C_3$ ,  $D_3$ ) merged images. Scale bar = 50  $\mu$ m. (B) Relative fluorescence intensity of the corresponding fluorescence images ( $A_2$ ,  $B_2$ ,  $C_2$ ,  $D_2$ ). Values represent mean standard error (n = 3). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

## 3.3. Imaging of living cells

CCK-8 assay was performed to investigate the cytotoxicity of SNARF-SeSPy on living A549 cells. As illustrated in Fig. S11, after treatment with various concentrations of the probe for 12 h, the cell viability only changed slightly, suggesting the probe featured low

cytotoxicity. On the basis of the outstanding performance of SNARF-SeSPy for H<sub>2</sub>S detection, we then evaluated the application of this probe in living cells. As a control, the A549 cells stained with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min exhibited weak fluorescence; however, the presence of H<sub>2</sub>S (50  $\mu$ M) resulted in a large increase in red fluorescence intensity. When the cells were preincubated with



**Fig. 3.** (A) Fluorescence images of zebrafish. ( $A_1$ - $A_3$ ) The zebrafish was incubated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min; ( $B_1$ - $B_3$ ) the zebrafish pretreated with  $Na_2S$  (100  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min; ( $B_1$ - $B_3$ ) the zebrafish pretreated with  $Na_2S$  (100  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min; ( $D_1$ - $D_3$ ) the cells pretreated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min; ( $D_1$ - $D_3$ ) the cells pretreated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min was treated with SNARF-SeSPy (10  $\mu$ M) for 30 min ( $A_1$ ,  $B_1$ ,  $C_1$ ,  $D_1$ ) brightfield image; ( $A_2$ ,  $B_2$ ,  $C_2$ ,  $D_2$ ) red channel; ( $A_3$ ,  $B_3$ ,  $C_3$ ,  $D_3$ ) merged images. Scale bar = 200  $\mu$ m. (B) Relative fluorescence intensity of the corresponding fluorescence images ( $A_2$ ,  $B_2$ ,  $C_2$ ,  $D_2$ ). Values represent mean standard error (n = 3). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

H<sub>2</sub>S (100  $\mu$ M) and then incubated with the probe (10  $\mu$ M), the fluorescence intensity further increased. To verify whether the probe was capable to image endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S in living cells, we sequentially incubated the cells with 20  $\mu$ M of SNP (a NO donor capable of inducing endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S production by upregulate the enzyme activity of cystathionine- $\beta$ -synthase and cystathionine- $\gamma$ -lyase) and 10  $\mu$ M of SNARF-SeSPy. A remarkable increase in fluorescence was noticed compared to the control group (Fig. 2). These results illustrated that SNARF-SeSPy was suited to monitor exogenous and endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S fluctuations in living cells.

#### 3.4. Imaging of living zebrafish larvae

To enlarge the range of application, we set out to explore the ability of SNARF-SeSPy to image H<sub>2</sub>S in vivo. We chose the zebrafish larvae as a model organism because the genes of zebrafish and human had 70% homology (Fig. 3). The zebrafish showed almost undetected red fluorescence after treatment with SNARF-SeSPy. After the zebrafish were incubated with various amounts of H<sub>2</sub>S (100 or 200 µM), followed by incubation with SNARF-SeSPy (10 µM), varying degrees of fluorescence increases emerged in red channel, which demonstrated the probe could detect exogenous H<sub>2</sub>S. Visualization of endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S by exogenous SNP stimulation was also performed. In the presence of SNP, the zebrafish presented an obvious red fluorescence from pelvic fin to pectoral fin, which was due to the reaction of SNARF-SeSPy with endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S in vivo. These data demonstrated that SNARF-SeSPy potentially served as a probe for the detection of exogenous and endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S in vivo.

### 4. Conclusion

In summary, we reported two red-emitting fluorescent probes capable of detecting H<sub>2</sub>S. Our results demonstrated that –Se-Slinkage could effectively improve the anti-interference of the designed probe to detect H<sub>2</sub>S compared with –S-S- linkage. The probe SNARF-SeSPy could react with H<sub>2</sub>S via dual selenium-sulfur exchange reaction to release the fluorophore, thus showing fluorescence turn-on response. Moreover, the probe was able to respond H<sub>2</sub>S with high selectivity, sensitivity and anti-interference. Results of imaging H<sub>2</sub>S in living cells and zebrafish demonstrated that SNARF-SeSPy enabled to track exogenous and endogenous H<sub>2</sub>S in vitro and in vivo. We expected that –Se-S- linkage could be used as a valuable response site to construct H<sub>2</sub>S probes for the diagnosis of H<sub>2</sub>S-related diseases in the future.

#### **Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### **CRediT authorship contribution statement**

Xiaoyu Zhang: Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft. Wangbo Qu: Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft. Heng Liu: Conceptualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. Yingying Ma: Validation, Writing review & editing. Linlin Wang: Validation, Writing - review & editing. Qi Sun: Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. Fabiao Yu: Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

#### Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC. 21961010, 21602051, 21775162, 21804102), Talent Program of Hainan Medical University (Grants XRC190034, XRC180006), and Hundred-Talent Program (Hainan 2018).

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aca.2020.02.061.

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