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Metal Organic Frameworks as Biosensing Materials for COVID-19

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Metal Organic Frameworks as Biosensing Materials for COVID-19

- [Godwin A. Udourioh](#),
- [Moses M. Solomon](#) &
- [Emmanuel I. Epelle](#)

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak is the most startling public health crises with attendant global socio-economic burden ever experienced in the twenty-first century. The level of devastation by this outbreak is such that highly impacted countries will take years to recover. Studies have shown that timely detection based on accelerated sample testing and accurate diagnosis are crucial steps to reducing or preventing the spread of any pandemic outbreak. In this opinionated review, the impacts of metal organic frameworks (MOFs) as a biosensor in a pandemic outbreak is investigated with reference to COVID-19. Biosensing technologies have been proven to be very effective in clinical analyses, especially in assessment of severe infectious diseases. Polymerase chain reactions (PCR, RT-PCR, CRISPR) - based test methods predominantly used for SARS-COV-2 diagnoses have serious limitations and the health scientists and researchers are urged to come up with a more robust and versatile system for solving diagnostic problem associated with the current and future pandemic outbreaks. MOFs, an

emerging crystalline material with unique characteristics will serve as promising biosensing materials in a pandemic outbreak such as the one we are in. We hereby highlight the characteristics of MOFs and their sensing applications, potentials as biosensors in a pandemic outbreak and draw the attention of researchers to a new vista of research that needs immediate action.

Introduction

As at 6.03 pm CEST, 10 March, 2021, there have been 118,684,343 COVID-19 cases, including 2,633,281 deaths confirmed globally by WHO, ECDC, NCDC and John Hopkins University.[120](#) Since the first case of COVID-19 was detected in China's Hubei province in late 2019, stringent measures such as lockdowns, travel bans, border closure *etc.* have been imposed in order to control or stop the spread of the outbreak, yet the global spread of the virus has continued to record significant increase with attendant global socio-economic burden.[31,88](#) In fact, reports from WHO and John Hopkins University reveals that the second wave of the outbreak is more devastating thus has left people in great fear.[93](#)

Sample testing is an essential first step to responding to any pandemic outbreak.[31,45](#) Diagnosis plays a decisive role in making prompt decisions on detection, contact tracing, isolation, management and treatment of infected persons.[45](#) However, in the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, most countries are unable to meet up with the massive diagnostic testing order given by WHO.[79,83,86](#) This has resulted in a continuous spread due to community transmission.[79,86](#)

As suggested by WHO, the general benchmark for adequate testing for a positive rate is around 3–12% per 1000 persons.[23](#) South Korea, Uruguay, Germany and Australia recorded a positive rate of 1% hence being considered as countries with lowest COVID-19 related deaths in the world.[24,37](#) South Korea was able to achieve the feat through their intensive testing programs occasioned by "drive-through" and "phone booths" tests.[81](#) On the other hand, countries like Mexico and Nigeria have positive rates of 20–50% (a case is found for every few tests conducted), indicating the unlikelihood of testing widely enough to find all cases.[37](#) No wonder the number of new confirmed cases keep increasing daily.[120](#)

Apart from the disparity in country's political and policy frameworks which may hinder the control of the continuous spread of the pandemic, the biosensing technologies (technologies behind testing and diagnosis) are important factors to consider. A biosensor is a device used for the detection of biological and biochemical agents; employing a biologically derived or a biomimetic recognition element while either undergoing a biochemical reaction (for example, enzyme-based biosensors) or binding the target molecule in a highly specific way. Studies have shown that biosensing devices, materials or technologies for testing infectious diseases or at time of pandemic outbreak must rigorously satisfy requirements of accessibility and affordability, rapidity, high sensitivity and selectivity, robustness, flexibility and simplicity in usage, ability to be mass produced *etc.*[15,81](#)

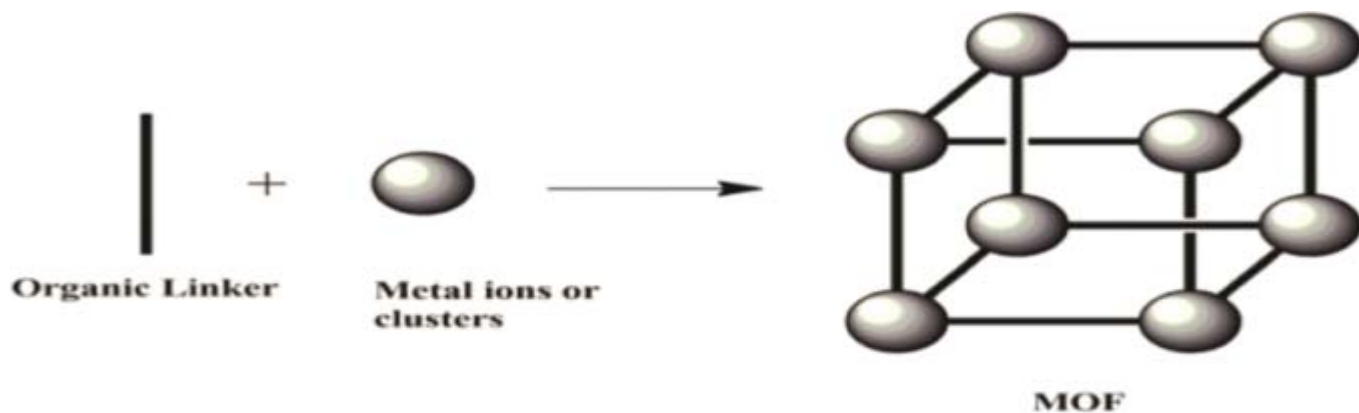
The present trend in the daily reports on the confirmed cases of the COVID-19 globally may be a pointer to the fact that the biosensing technologies currently in used for SARS-COV-2 testing are not satisfactory. It is pertinent to review the type of assays, strength and limitations of the commonly used biosensing methods since the pandemic outbreak and explore the potentials of other versatile biosensing materials and technologies such as metal organic frameworks (MOFs) for possibility of development and utilization in solving diagnostic problem associated with the current and future pandemic outbreaks.

Metal Organic Frameworks (MOFs) and Their Characteristics

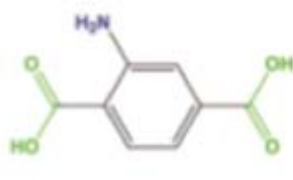
Metal Organic Frameworks (MOFs) are advanced structures that are highly ordered, porous and customizable. They grow in a crystal form and are extremely flexible, especially when combined with nanoparticles for additional functionality or attributes.[70,137](#) MOFs are made of metal clusters coordinated with organic linkers to generate a large Langmuir surface area and small-to-medium-sized pores.[54](#) MOFs are defined as porous structures constructed from the coordinative bonding between metal ions and organic ligands or bridging ligands.[138](#) The linkers or bridging ligands consist of carboxylates, or anions, such as phosphonate, sulfonate, and heterocyclic compounds while the inorganic units are the metal ions or clusters called secondary building units (SBUs).[138](#) The coordination number, geometry of the metal ions and

the nature of the functional groups determine the geometry of MOFs. Based on this we have octahedron with six points of extension, trigonal prism with five points, square paddle-wheel (four points), and triangle with three points. Some commonly used metals for synthesis of MOFs include La, Zn, Cr, Cu, In Co, Fe and Ag while some common organic linkers or ligands include 1,4-benzenedicarboxylate or terephthalate moiety (H_2 bdc), Benzene-1,3,5-tricarboxylate moiety (H_3 btc), 4,4'-biphenyldicarboxylate (H_2 bpdc), 1,4-bis(imidazol-1-ylmethyl)benzene (Bix), 1,3,5-benzenetriphosphoric acid, 1,5-naphthalenedisulfonic acid, 4,4'-bipyridine, 2,5-dihydroxybenzene-1,4-dicarboxylic acid (H_4 dhbdc), 2,6-naphthalenedicarboxylic acid (H_2 ndc), adamantane tetracarboxylic acid (H_4 atc), 4,4',4''-benzene-1,3,5-tryl-benzoic acid (H_3 btb).¹³⁸ Figure 1 shows the typical skeletal structure of MOF and some examples of ligand structures.

Figure 1



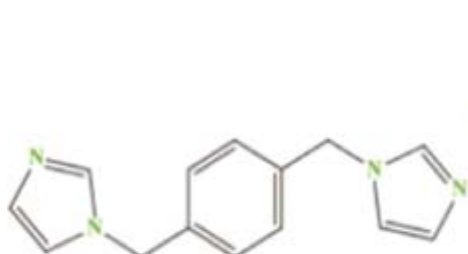
H_2bpdc : biphenyl-4,4'-dicarboxylic acid



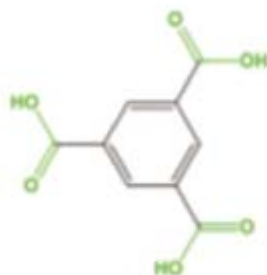
H_2Abdc : 2-aminoterephthalic acid



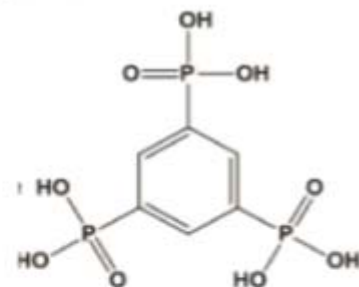
H_2bdc : Terephthalic acid



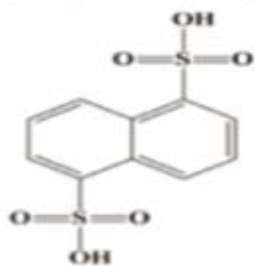
1,4-bis(imidazol-1-ylmethyl)benzene (bix)



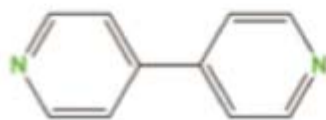
H_3btc : 1,3,5-benzenetricarboxylic acid



3,5-benzenetriphosphoric acid



1,5-naphthalenedisulfonic



4,4'-bipyridine

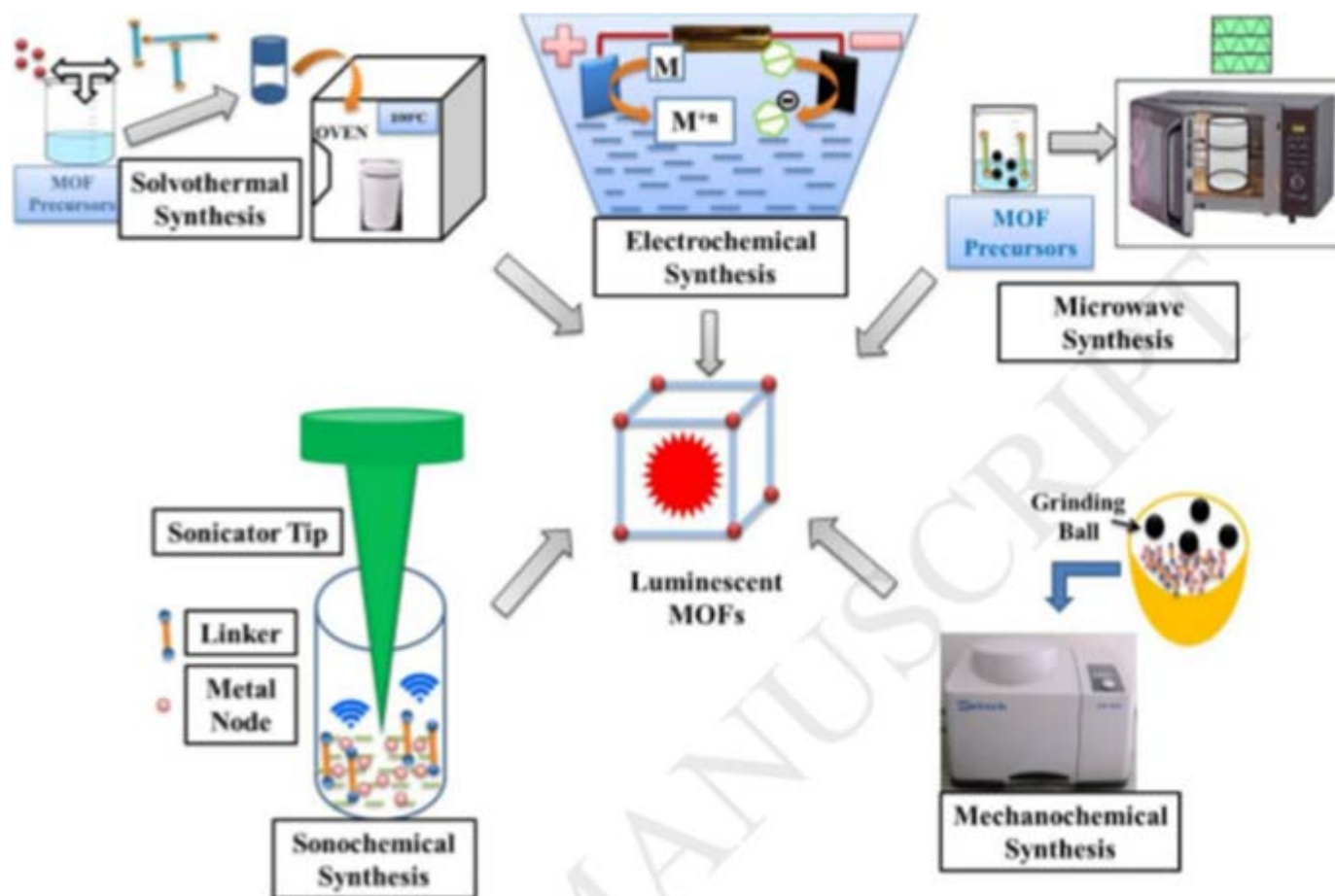
Typical Structure of MOF and Some examples of organic linkers of ligands. Adapted from Sharmin and Zafar.¹³⁷ © 2016 The Author(s).

[Full size image](#)

MOFs are often synthesized using solvothermal, ionothermal, diffusion, microwave, ultrasound-assisted and template-directed syntheses

methods.[33,65,128,143](#) Figure [2](#) shows the different synthesis methods for MOFs. MOFs may be classified based on the type of metals and guest species into five categories, *viz.* transition metal MOFs, rare earth metal (REM) MOFs, composite structure MOFs, heterometallic MOFs, and S-block metal MOFs.[103](#) Most MOFs are simply named after the institutions from where they were produced. Examples include MIL-101 [$\text{Cr}_3\text{O}(\text{OH}, \text{F}, \text{H}_2\text{O})_3(1,4\text{-bdc})_3$] and other MIL-series named after Materials Institute Lavoisier and commonly used for drug delivery,[48](#) HKUST-1 [$\text{Cu}_2(\text{H}_2\text{O})_2(\text{CO}_2)_4$] named after Hong Kong University of Science and used for adsorption and storage,[67](#) UiO-66- NH_2 named after University of Oslo and used for biosensing [121](#) and an isoreticular MOF IRMOF-9 [$\text{Zn}_4\text{O}(\text{bpdc})_3$] used for adsorption and storage.[95](#) In comparison to other high-class materials such as graphenes, carbon nanotubes, gold nanotubes etc., MOFs are emerging class of porous inorganic-organic high profile hybrid compounds which have attracted much attention in recent time due to its stunning properties and wider applications.[75](#) Figure [3](#) shows comparison of MOFs with other materials in terms of properties.

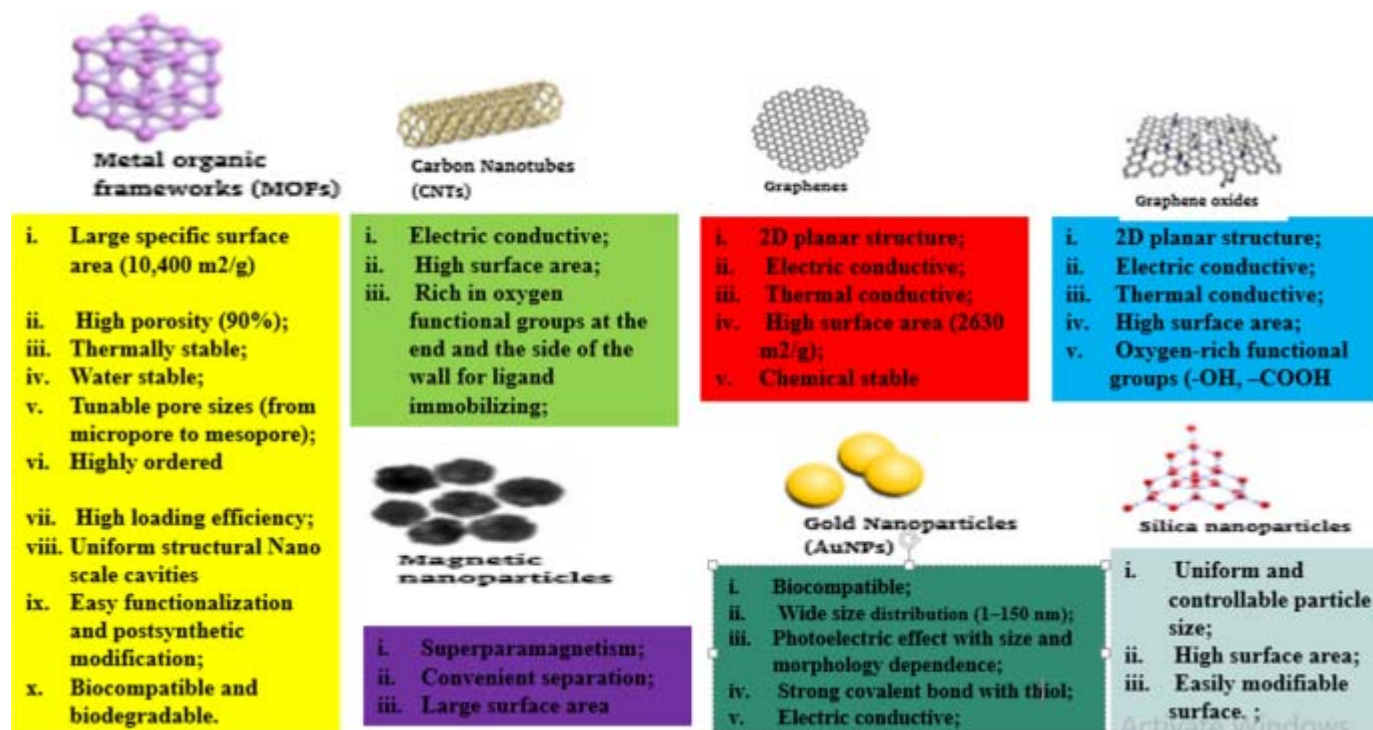
Figure 2



Schematic of commonly used approaches for high-throughput synthesis of MOFs. Reproduced with permission from Kukkar *et al.* [50](#). © 2018 Elsevier B.V.

[Full size image](#)

Figure 3



Stunning Properties of MOF Compared to other high class materials.

[Full size image](#)

MOFs as Biosensors

There are different sensing platforms, viz. luminescence, surface plasmon resonance, electrochemical, impedance, fluorescence imaging (magnetic resonance imaging MRI), interferometry and solvatochromism.[18,49,69,97,98,142](#) Recently, MOFs have been explored as Biological and biochemical sensors.[11,36](#) Hao and Yan[36](#) developed a lanthanide-functionalized MOF as a fluorescent probe for hippuric acid in urine which was considered as the biological indicators of toluene exposure. The fabricated sensor, according to the authors has several attractive features, including high sensitivity, excellent selectivity, fast response time (~ 1 min), broad linear range (0.05–8.0 mg/mL), and good reversibility and regeneration.[36](#) The sensor was successfully applied to determination of hippuric acid in human urines with recoveries in the range of 93.5–102.9%. The high porosity, tuneable chemical composition, large surface area, high crystallinity, and potential for post synthetic modification for molecular recognition have made MOFs promising candidates for biosensing

application.⁸⁰ Besides, the inherent luminescence of many MOFs have made it useful in sensing platforms.^{97,98} Some MOFs and their biosensing applications are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Some MOFs and their biosensing applications/detection limits

[Full size table](#)

MOFs as Biosensing Materials in Pandemic Outbreaks

Viruses are often the culprit in epidemic and pandemic outbreaks. They are infectious agents, mostly in nanoscale capable of causing various diseases.⁸² MOFs have been used as biosensors during epidemic and pandemic outbreaks.

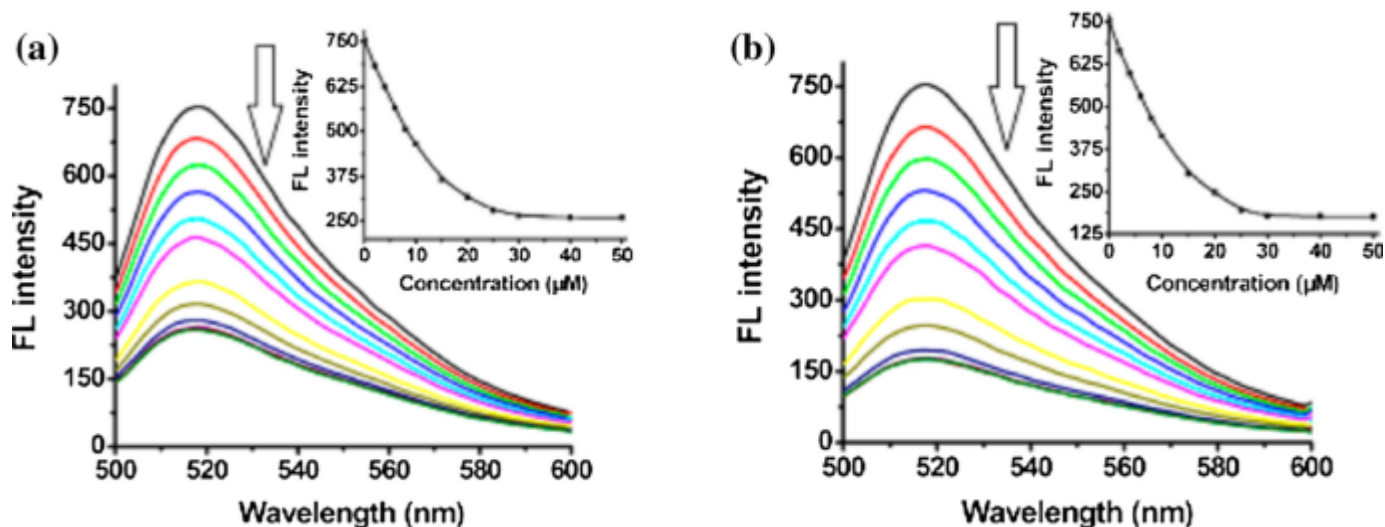
Sensing of Human Immunodeficiency Virus

The retrovirus is a RNA virus whereby its DNA is integrated into its host chromosomal DNA.^{8,82} Detection at the early stage of infection may be difficult due to the rare proviral DNA expression in the infected host.⁹⁹ The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which belongs to the genus *Lentivirus* within the family of *Retroviridae* and subfamily *Orthoretrovirinae*⁹⁹ is a human retrovirus. Based on the genetic characteristics and differences in the viral antigens, there are two types of HIV: HIV-1 and HIV-2.^{99,100} The HIV-1 type is believed to have evolved from non-human primate immunodeficiency viruses from the Central African chimpanzees (SIVcpz)^{30,32} while the HIV-2 type is linked to the West African sooty mangabeys (SIVsm) as the origin.¹⁰⁰ HIV infection results in acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), a disease that is associated with the depletion of the CD₄⁺T cell of the host.⁸ According to the WHO, at the end of 2019, an estimated 38.0 million people are living with HIV and about 33 million deaths have resulted from AIDS-related sicknesses.¹¹⁸ Because early diagnosis and treatment of HIV can improve survival and reduce morbidity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recommended routine testing.⁴ Examples of such routine test are the western blot and enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) assay.⁸² Nevertheless, because of reaction of samples with one or more of the antigens, these methods suffer from some false positive and negative outcomes.⁸² Researchers have taken advantage of large specific surface area,

high porosity, fluorescence quenching, high loading efficiency, easy functionalization, and tunable pore properties of MOFs to deploy them in biosensing applications including the biosensing of HIV.

Yang *et al.*¹³⁰ applied $[\text{Cu}_3(\text{Cmdcp})_2(\text{dps})_4(\text{H}_2\text{O})_4(\text{SO}_4)]_n$ for the detection of human immunodeficiency virus-1 double-stranded DNA (HIV-1 ds-DNA). The 3-dimensional structure of the MOF enhanced the distinction between the ds-DNA and ss-DNA molecules. The intrinsic quenching properties of the unsaturated Cu(II) metal ion coordination centre and the conjugated π -electron system of the aromatic groups on both linkers enabled electrostatic and hydrogen bonding *via* π -stacking interactions of the probe DNAs with the MOF, leading to photoinduced electron transfer (PET) fluorescence quenching. There was also a strong interaction between the probe DNA and the target DNA sequence. The non-target DNA sequences were between 50 and 86% less fluorescence than the target sequence in the dsDNA assay due to the diminished effect of its concentration. The probe recorded a high selectivity and 196pM detection limit for the viral dsDNA.¹³⁰ Notably, the interaction of the MOF $[\text{Cu}_3(\text{Cmdcp})_2(\text{dps})_4(\text{H}_2\text{O})_4(\text{SO}_4)]_n$ with the complimentary sequences of HIV ds-DNA: carboxyfluorescein FAM-labeled probe ss-DNA, 5'-FAM-TTCTTCTTTTTTCT-3' (P-DNA-1) and SUDV RNA: 5-FAM-TTAAAAAGTTTGTCCATC-3 (P-DNA-2) showed that the fluorescence intensity of the complimentary sequences of both HIV ds-DNA and SUDV RNA decreased upon the addition of the MOF. The quenching efficiency ($Q_E\%$) of both HIV ds-DNA and SUDV RNA sequences were 65 and 76% respectively, indicating that the MOF efficiently quenched the fluorescence of both P-DNA-1 and P-DNR-2 sequences. The fluorescence spectra of both HIV-1 ds-DNA and SUDV RNA complementary sequences are presented in Fig. 4.

Figure 4



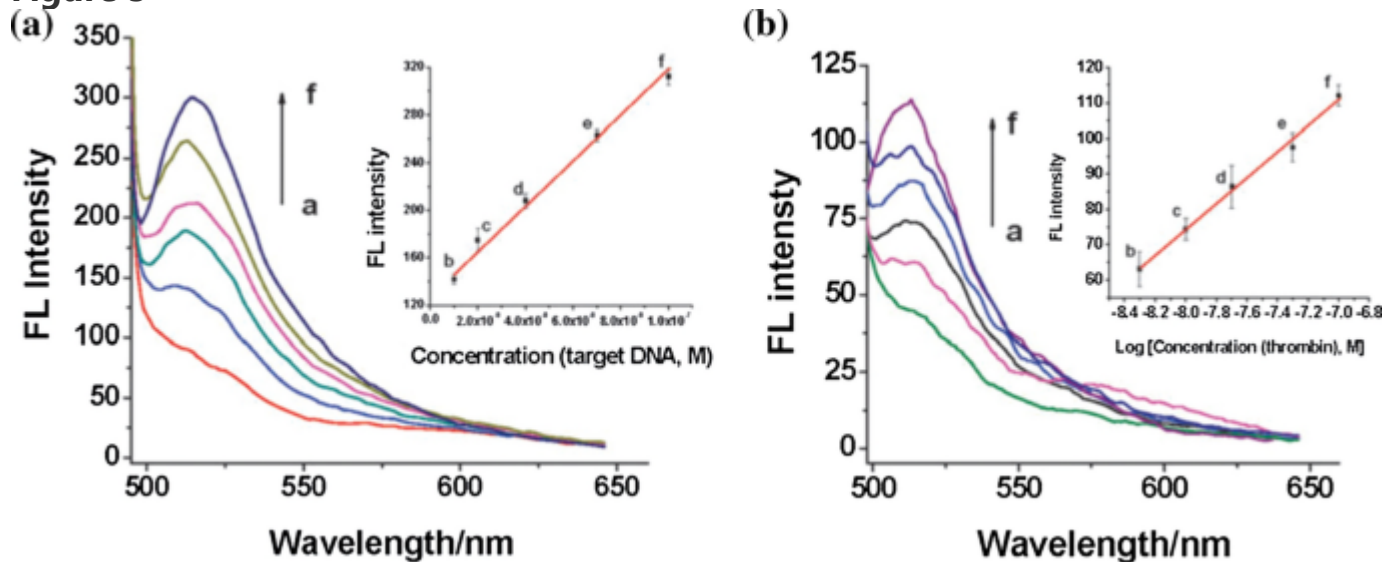
Fluorescence spectra of P-DNA-1 (a, 50 nM) and P-DNA-2 (b, 50 nM) incubated with MOF $[\text{Cu}_3(\text{Cmdcp})_2(\text{dps})_4(\text{H}_2\text{O})_4(\text{SO}_4)]_n$ of varying concentrations at room temperature. Insets: plots of fluorescence intensity at 518 nm versus the concentrations of MOF $[\text{Cu}_3(\text{Cmdcp})_2(\text{dps})_4(\text{H}_2\text{O})_4(\text{SO}_4)]_n$. Reproduced with permission from Yang et al.[129](#). © 2015 American Chemical Society.

[Full size image](#)

Zhu *et al.*[144](#) reported the successful application of a 2-D transition metal MOF $\text{Cu}(\text{H}_2\text{dtoa})$ [i.e. N,N' -bis(2-hydroxyethyl)dithiooxamidatocopper(ii)] for detection of HIV-1 U5 long terminal repeat DNA sequence with detection limits of 3nM, high sensitivity and selectivity. The mechanism of action was enhanced by the intrinsic quenching properties of the metal ion Cu^{2+} , coordination centre and conjugated π -electron system of the dithiooxamide linkers. These properties led to the non-covalent binding of the 6-carboxyfluorescein or FAM single stranded DNA (ssDNA) probe *via* π -stacking interactions with the MOF, which quenched its fluorescence in a process called photo induced electron transfer (PET).[80,144](#) There occurred a turn-on sensing of the viral gene when the target DNA was added due to the release of the probe from the MOF and the fluorescence restoration.[80](#) The probe-MOF exhibits a linear increase in the range of 10–100 nM and the sensor system was believed to be highly sensitive and selective. The Fluorescence spectra of the FAM-labeled DNA– $\text{Cu}(\text{H}_2\text{dtoa})$ in the presence of different concentrations of target DNA is shown in Fig. [5a](#). Similarly, Fig. [5b](#) depicts the fluorescence

spectra of the FAM labeled probe DNA 2–Cu(H₂dtoa) in the presence of different concentrations of thrombin.

Figure 5



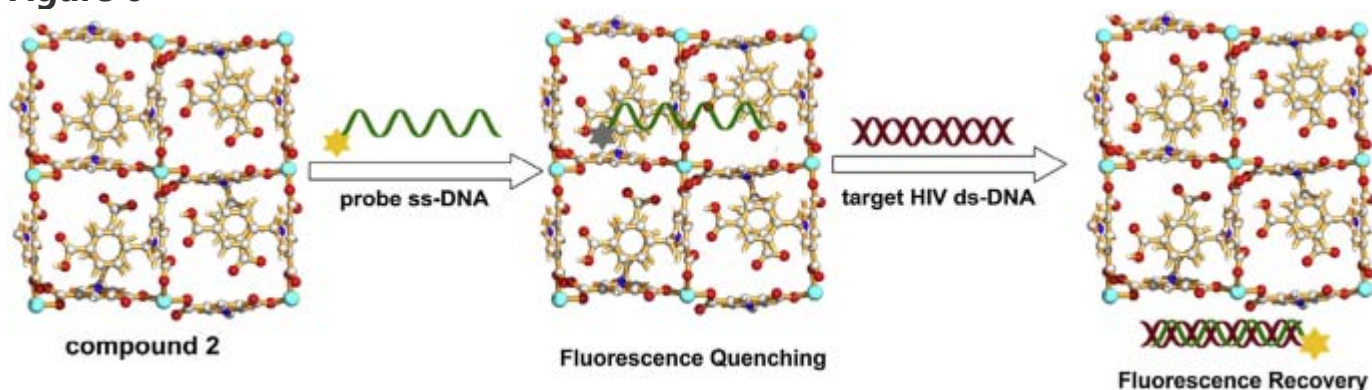
(a) Fluorescence spectra of the FAM-labeled DNA–Cu(H₂dtoa) in the presence of different concentrations of target DNA. Inset: plot of fluorescence intensity vs. concentrations of target DNA. (b) Fluorescence spectra of the FAM labeled probe DNA 2–Cu(H₂dtoa) in the presence of different concentrations of thrombin. Inset: plot of fluorescence intensity vs. logarithm of concentrations of thrombin. The concentration of dye-labeled probe DNA 1 and DNA 2 is 50 nM. Reproduced with permission from Zhu *et al.*¹⁴³ (© Royal Society of Chemistry 2013) and Miller *et al.*⁸⁰ (© 2016 The Authors).

[Full size image](#)

Zhao *et al.*¹⁴⁰ isolated six water-stable zinc(II) zwitterionic carboxylate compounds with 1D chain, 2D networks and 3D MOFs structures through the coordination reaction of {Na₃[Na₉(Cbdc-p)₆(H₂O)₁₈]}_n with Zn(NO₃)₂·6H₂O. Among the isolated compounds, the 2D sheet, {[Zn(Cbdcp)(bpe)_{1/2}]}·2H₂O compound was found to efficiently quenched the fluorescence of P-DNA. The authors had selected a FAM-labeled P-DNA 50-FAM-TTCTTCTTTTCT-30 as complementary sequences for HIV ds-DNA and noticed that the fluorescence intensity of P-DNA decreased upon the addition of {[Zn(Cbdcp)(bpe)_{1/2}]}·2H₂O compound. The quenching efficiency (QE%) was 73% with the saturation concentration calculated as 10mM. It was proposed that the compound formed a noncovalent complex P-DNA@2 system with its functional aromatic

rings, the carboxylic acid groups, the positively charged pyridinium and Zn^{2+} cation centers and 2D plane structure (Fig. 6).

Figure 6



Proposed mechanism for the detection of target HIV ds-DNA sequences based on a fluorescent biosensor formed from compound 2 and fluorophore-labeled probe ss-DNA. Reproduced with permission from Zhao *et al.*[139](#). © 2016 Published by Elsevier B.V.

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Sensing of Ebola Virus (Sudan Virus) RNA Sequence

Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever is a viral hemorrhagic fever of humans and other primates that first appeared in 1976 in two simultaneous outbreaks.[44](#) EVD is caused by Ebola viruses (EBOV), single-strand RNA viruses of the family Filoviridae.[78](#) There are about five species of EBOV, namely Zaire, Bundibugyo, Sudan, Reston and Tai Forest. Although the fatality rate varies from specie to specie of EVD, it is in the range of 50–90%.[44,104](#) The chronology of previous Ebola virus disease outbreaks and the actual fatality rate can be found in the WHO recent reports.[119](#) EBOV infects its host cell by attaching to the receptors through the GP glycoprotein and getting endocytosed in host vesicles.[44](#) The C-type lectins DCSIGN and DC-SIGNR is pivotal in the process as they bind to Ebola glycoproteins.[44](#) The entry pathway of EBOV into host cell, the binding to cell-surface receptors, the slashing of the viral GP1 protein into N-terminal fragment Ebola within the endosome, and the digestion of cathepsin B into GP2 are illustrated in Fig. [7](#). The laboratory diagnosis of EBOV includes polymerase chain reaction, enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), antigen ELISA,

immunohistochemistry, fluorescence assay, electron microscopy, indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA), immuno-blot (western blot), biosensors SPR, QCM, optical, and DNA-based fluorescence nanobarcodes methodology.[19,44,104](#)

Figure 7

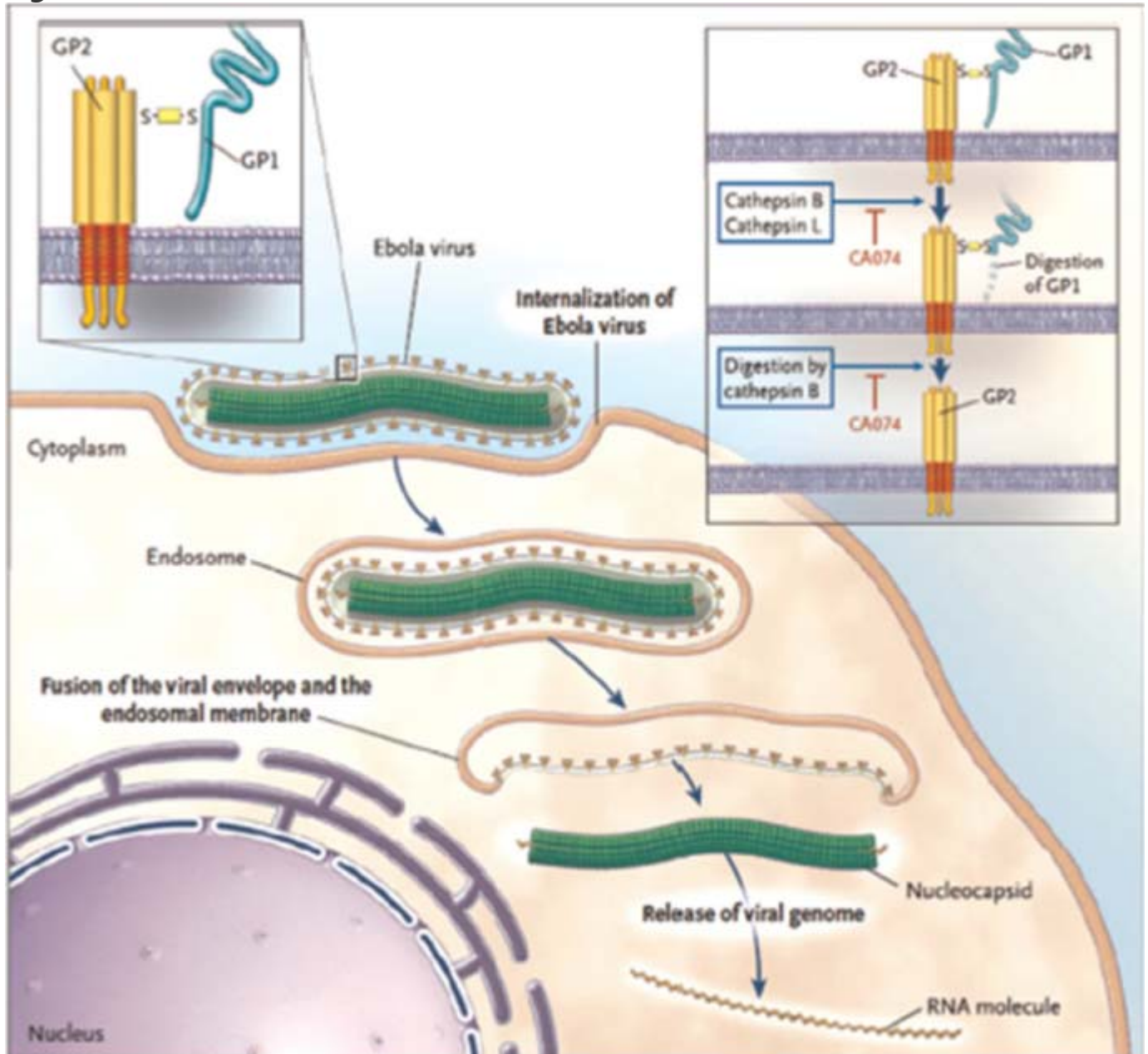


Illustration of the entry pathway of Ebola Virus into host cell [44](#). The process begins with the EBOV getting attached to the cell surface receptors and internalizing in the endosome.[44,78,104,118](#) In the endosome, the endosomal proteases (cathepsin B and cathepsin L) fragment the viral GP1 protein into N-terminal 44,77,103. Cathepsin B thereafter digests it into GP2 that helps in the

fusion of the viral envelope and the endosomal membrane.[44,78,104](#) The viral genome is then release into the cytoplasm.[44,78,104](#) Upon release, the proteolysis of GP1 is inhibited by CA074[44,78,104](#) paving way for the progression of the infection. The figure was reproduced with permission from Kaushik *et al.*[44](#) © 2015 Elsevier B.V.

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Conflict of 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.

Author information

Authors and Affiliations

- 1. Analytical/Material Chemistry Laboratory, Department of Pure and Applied Chemistry, Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences, Veritas University, Abuja, P.O.Box 6523, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria**
Godwin A. Udourioh
- 2. Department of Chemistry, College of Science and Technology, Covenant University, Canaanland, Km10, Idiroko Road, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria**
Moses M. Solomon
- 3. Institute for Materials and Processes (IMP), School of Engineering, University of Edinburgh, The King's Buildings, Edinburgh, EH9 3FB, UK**
Emmanuel I. Epelle

Corresponding author

Correspondence to [Moses M. Solomon](#).

Additional information

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