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Monitoring of chlorsulfuron in biological fluids and water samples by molecular fluorescence using rhodamine B as fluorophore



Magdalena Alesso^a, Luis A. Escudero^a, María Carolina Talio^{b,*}, Liliana P. Fernández^{a,b,*}

^a Área de Química Analítica, Facultad de Química, Bioquímica y Farmacia, Universidad Nacional de San Luis, San Luis, Argentina

^b Instituto de Química de San Luis (INQUISAL-CONICET), Chacabuco y Pedernera, San Luis, 5700 Argentina

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ABSTRACT

A new simple methodology is proposed for chlorsulfuron (CS) traces quantification based upon enhancement of rhodamine B (RhB) fluorescent signal. Experimental variables that influence fluorimetric sensitivity have been studied and optimized. The zeroth order regression calibration was linear from 0.866 to 35.800 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ CS, with a correlation coefficient of 0.99. At optimal experimental conditions, a limit of detection of 0.259 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ and a limit of quantification of 0.866 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ were obtained. The method showed good sensitivity and adequate selectivity and was applied to the determination of trace amounts of CS in plasma, serum and water samples with satisfactory results analyzed by ANOVA test. The proposed methodology represents an alternative to traditional chromatographic techniques for CS monitoring in complex samples, using an accessible instrument in control laboratories.

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1. Introduction

Pesticides are widely used in agriculture to improve productivity and, consequently, they can produce residues in crops, soils and surface water. Their persistence is an important matter of concern due to their toxicity and possible carcinogenicity. The presence of pesticides could affect ground water or disrupt water treatment plants [1].

Sulfonylurea herbicides, which were firstly introduced in the 1980s [2], are used for weed control in many crops [3,4]. Chlorsulfuron was the first commercial herbicide from the sulfonylurea group. It is mainly utilized to control a large variety of grass and broad-leaved weeds as pre-emergence application on wheat or as a post-emergence application on wheat, barley, flax, triticale and oat crops [5–7]. Therefore, their residues can be found in water sources that can be potentially used for human and animal consumption. In addition, CS can enter the body of the population consuming water and/or food with residues of this herbicide. For this reason, it is important to develop rapid and simple methods to determine sulfonylurea residues at low levels [8,9].

In order to protect water systems, U.S. and European Union (EU) have established the maximum concentration levels for herbicides. For the EU, these values are 0.1 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ for single

compounds and 0.5 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ for total herbicides in drinking water [10]. The Argentine legislation only establishes a maximum concentration level for total pesticides in 100 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ [11].

CS determination involves the development of analytical methodologies with adequate sensitivity and selectivity because of the analyte low levels and complex matrixes [12]. Diverse analytical methods have been proposed for the determination of CS: these include high performance liquid chromatography with UV–vis detector [13–15], liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry [16,17] capillary electrophoresis [18,19] and bioassays [20]. In all cases, they have certain disadvantages, mainly related to time-consuming sample pre-treatment and/or the employment of expensive instrumental.

Spectrofluorimetric methods are a combination of sensitive techniques capable of detecting changes in the local environment of the fluorophore [21,22] using inexpensive instrumental. The employ of fluorescence techniques for organic pesticide residue is limited by the fact that, relatively few compounds are strongly luminescent. If the analyte is non or weakly luminescent, it can be converted into a luminescent compound through chemical and/or photochemical reactions, representing an advantage in the selectivity [23].

Considering that it is necessary to have simple, fast, sensitive and precise methodologies for pesticides traces determination, the aim of the present work is to develop an alternative methodology to traditional techniques for CS monitoring in biological fluids and water samples, using an accessible instrument in control laboratories.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lfernand@unsl.edu.ar (M.C. Talio), lfernand@unsl.edu.ar (L.P. Fernández).

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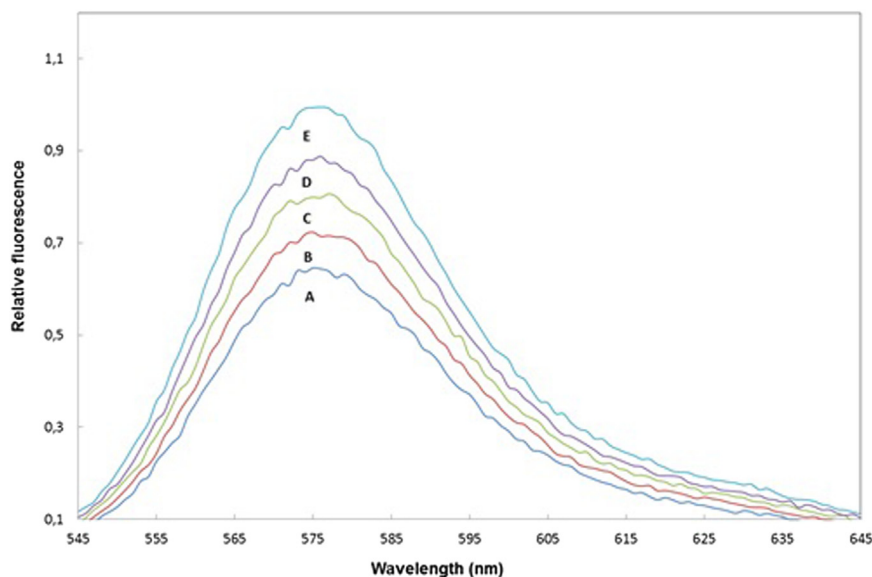


Fig. 1. Fluorescent spectra of RhB and RhB-CS systems.

2. Experimental

2.1. Reagents

Solution $1 \times 10^{-3} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ of CS (Supelco, Bellefonte, P.A., USA) was prepared by dissolving in methanol. Further dilutions $1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ in methanol were weekly prepared. All CS solutions were protected against light with aluminum foil and kept in a refrigerator at 4°C .

Stock solution of $1 \times 10^{-3} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ of RhB was prepared by dissolving RhB (Fluka AG, Chemische Fabrik, Buchs SG, Switzerland) in ultrapure water. Afterwards it was diluted obtaining working standard solution $1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$.

Buffer Tris $1 \times 10^{-2} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ (Mallinckrodt Chemical Works, NY, USA), Potassium dihydrophosphate (Biopack, Buenos Aires, Argentina) buffer solution $1 \times 10^{-2} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ potassium biphthalate and sodium tetraborate (Mallinckrodt Chemical Works) were used, obtaining the desired pH by addition of dilute HCl (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany) or NaOH (Mallinckrodt Chemical Works).

All chemicals used were of analytical grade and ultrapure water was used throughout.

2.2. Apparatus

Fluorescence spectra were performed on Shimadzu RF-5301PC spectrofluorometer (Shimadzu Corporation, Analytical Instrument Division, Kyoto Japan) equipped with a 1.0 cm quartz cells and discharged Xenon lamp. The excitation and emission slits with a band pass of 5.0 nm were used for all spectral measurements.

Measurements of pH were carried out using Orion Expandable Ion Analyzer pHmeter (Orion Research, MA, USA) Model EA 940 with a combined glass electrode.

A centrifuge was used to accelerate the phase's separation process in blood samples.

Statistical analysis of data were performed by multiple analysis of variance following a simple, balanced one-way model student's test was used to compare means and the level of significance was set at 95%. Minitab[®] 15.1.20.0. software was used.

2.3. Collection and treatment of samples

2.3.1. Biological fluids

Blood samples from healthy subjects (each 10 mL) were obtained by vein puncture of the forearm and samples were placed in 2 polystyrene tubes with and without Li-heparin (anticoagulant). Blood tubes with anticoagulant were homogenized and centrifuged (1500g) during 15 min. Then the clear and transparent supernatant corresponding to plasma were extracted and reserved at 4°C until assays. With the aim of accelerating the coagulation process to realize the serum separation, tubes containing blood without heparin were thermostated at 37°C during 30 min. Then, systems were centrifuged (1500g) during 15 min and supernatant was put in polypropylene tubes with hermetic closing.

Urine sample of 24 h of healthy subject was collected in polystyrene test tubes, between 8 and 10 h AM to reduce possible variations provided by the circadian rhythms. Samples (10 mL approximately) were centrifuged 10 min at 1000g and processed immediately after arriving to laboratory. Supernatants (5 mL approximately) were reserved for CS quantification.

In order to skim the raw milk samples, they were centrifuged at 4000g, at 4°C , during 20 min and the solidified fat was removed using a glass spatula. The caseins were removed by centrifugation and the resulting supernatant contains whey proteins. The samples were stored at 4°C until analysis.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.3.2. Water samples

2.3.2.1. Tap water. Tap water samples were allowed to run for 10 min, and approximately 1000 mL of each were collected. Tap water samples were filtered and processed once they arrived in the laboratory.

2.3.2.2. Groundwater. Water from the region surrounding the city of Vicuña Mackenna located in the Cordoba, Argentina used for irrigation and consumption by humans and animals was sampled. Samples were filtered through 80 mm Whatman filter paper to remove any sand and other possible major particles and stored in dark at 4°C until CS determination was performed.

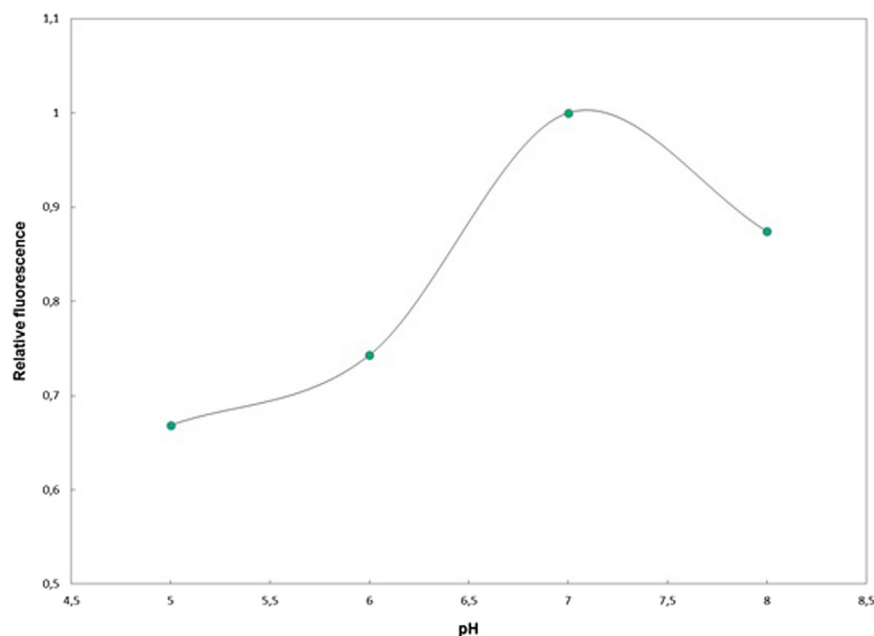


Fig. 2. Influence of pH in CS determination.

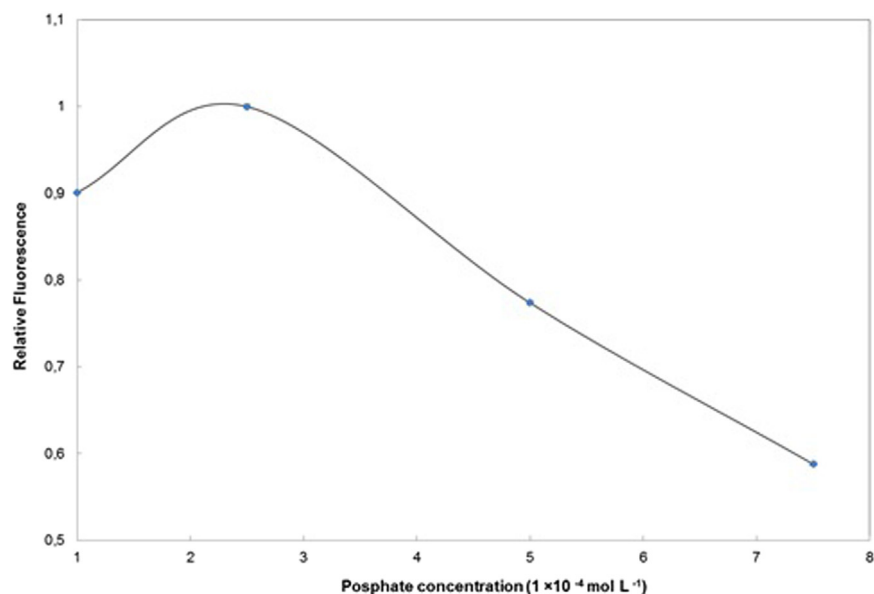


Fig. 3. Influence of phosphate buffer concentration in CS determination.

2.4. General procedure

Adequate aliquot of CS standard solution $1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$, 0.5 mL of Rhodamine B 1×10^{-6} and 0.250 mL of phosphate buffer solution (pH 7.0), were placed in a 10 mL graduated volumetric flask. The whole mixture was diluted to 10 mL with ultrapure water. The system was kept at room temperature for 5 min. Fluorescent emission was determined at 576 nm ($\lambda_{\text{ex}}=540 \text{ nm}$). Emission spectra of CS-RhB systems at optimal experimental conditions are shown in Fig. 1.

2.5. Accuracy study

Adequate volumes of samples were spiked with increasing CS amounts 0.00, 8.98, 17.9 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$. CS contents were determined by the proposed method applying General procedure.

2.6. Precision study

The precision of the method was evaluated in terms of repeatability and intermediate precision (inter day precision). Individual repeatabilities were calculated from the assay values of independent samples spiked at two concentration levels of chlorsulfuron standards (5.37 and 21.47 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$). Each one was analyzed by triplicate on the same day. The number of values (n) was six per level and sample. The repeatability (expressed as relative standard deviations (RSD%)) were found to be 2.684 and 3.039; 3.256 and 2.114; 3.282 and 1.917 for water, urine and serum samples, respectively.

3. Results and discussion

As with all of the sulfonylureas, CS molecule consists of three distinct parts: an aryl group, the sulfonylurea bridge, and a

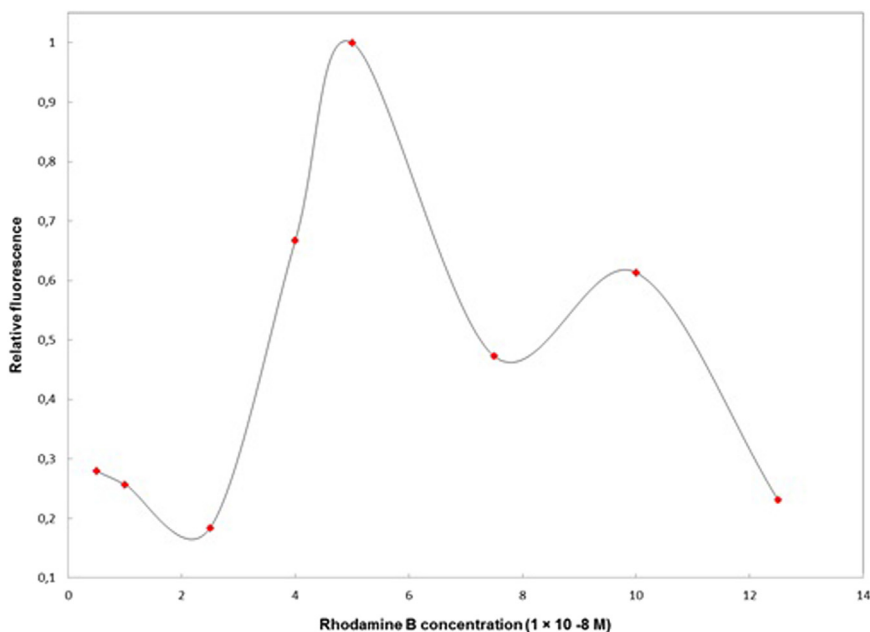


Fig. 4. Optimization of RhB concentration.

Table 1

Experimental conditions and analytical quality parameters for chlorsulfuron determination by proposed methodology.

Parameter	Studied range	Optimal condition
pH	2–9.22	7
Phosphate buffer concentration	$1\text{--}7.5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$	$2.5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$
RhB concentration	$0.5\text{--}12.5 \times 10^{-8} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$	$5 \times 10^{-8} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$
LOD	$0.259 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$	
LOQ	$0.866 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$	
Linearity range	$0.860\text{--}35.800 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$	

Table 2

Chlorsulfuron determination in biological fluids and water samples. Recovery study (n = 3; $\alpha=0.05$).

Sample	CS added ($\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$)	CS found \pm CI ($\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$)	Recovery (%) ^a
Plasma	–	0.00 ± 0.15	–
	8.98	9.21 ± 0.17	102.50
	17.90	17.6 ± 0.05	99.30
Serum	–	0.00 ± 0.27	–
	8.98	9.56 ± 0.42	106.50
	17.90	17.69 ± 0.42	98.80
Water	–	0.00 ± 0.15	–
	8.98	9.40 ± 0.05	104.60
	17.90	17.70 ± 0.25	98.90
Urine (24 h)	–	0.00 ± 0.07	–
	8.98	9.42 ± 0.20	104.90
	17.90	17.81 ± 0.12	99.50
Breast milk	–	0.00 ± 0.10	–
	8.98	8.96 ± 0.12	99.77
	17.90	18.01 ± 0.22	100.61
Ground water	–	0.00 ± 0.05	–
	8.98	8.99 ± 0.02	100.11
	17.90	17.82 ± 0.25	99.55

^a Recovery (%) = [(found-base)/added] \times 100.

nitrogen-containing heterocycle with different substituents in the ortho position in the phenyl or aryl group. CS is a weak acid with dissociation constant of $\text{pK}_a=3.6$ [24].

Conventionally, sulfonylureas have been analyzed by separative methodologies as HPLC and capillar electrophoresis in different

samples [25,26]. CS molecule does not show native fluorescence, so that, to perform fluorescence detection, a previous step of photochemical degradation has been necessary [27,28]. In this work, the fluorophore Rhodamine B (RhB) has been chosen for CS determination by fluorescence.

The effect of CS on RhB fluorescent signal was studied preparing a system with dye solution in the presence of CS. Simultaneously, RhB blank was also prepared. In the presence of CS, an increase of fluorescent signal of RhB was observed (Fig. 1).

It is well known that RhB has different structures pH-dependent. So that, the pH of system has a direct influence in RhB molecule and their capability to complex formation with CS. Also, self-aggregation of protonated RhB causes a diminution of fluorescence signal [29]. As a result of the interaction of the sulfonylurea with RhB, the carboxylic group of RhB becomes more basic once the positive charge of the dye has been neutralized. At pH below 5, the sulfonylurea induces the association/protonation of RhB and its spectral characteristics change [30].

The pH value of the aqueous systems containing a constant concentration of both CS and RhB was adjusted between 3.6 and 9.22 by addition of biphthalate (pH 4), acetic acid (pH 3.6 and 4.2), Tris (pH 6), phosphate (pH 6, 7, 7.2, 8) and tetraborate (pH 9.22) buffers. The best emission signal was achieved when phosphate buffer pH 7 was used (Fig. 2). Buffer concentration was optimized in the range from 1 to $7.5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$. As exhibits in Fig. 3, a concentration of $2.5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ produced the best results and it was chosen as optimal.

Other important parameter is the dye RhB concentration; this parameter must be maintained constant in order to assure the same contribution to the fluorescence signal in all samples/standards systems. Additionally, the RhB concentration must be sufficiently high to guarantee the CS/RhB association, assuring a quantitative complex formation. However, this molecule self-aggregates in concentrations over $1 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$ by means of π - π interactions [30]. The aggregation induces spectroscopic changes and affects dye efficiency and photostability [31,32]. Concentration of RhB solution was optimized, varying from 0 to $1.25 \times 10^{-7} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$. As shown in Fig. 4, the best result was obtained by employing a RhB concentration of $5 \times 10^{-8} \text{ mol L}^{-1}$.

Table 3Precision study (repeatability and intermediate precision) of chlorsulfuron determination in water, urine and serum samples ($\alpha=0.05$).

Sample	Level 1				Level 2				
	Recovery (%) ^a	Average CS (μL^{-1}) ^b	RSD (%)	n	Recovery (%) ^a	Average CS (μL^{-1}) ^b	RSD (%)	n	
Day 1	Water	99.776	5.358 ± 0.146	2.612	6	100.670	21.614 ± 0.463	2.045	6
Day 2		102.569	5.508 ± 0.471	2.541	6	97.028	20.832 ± 0.952	4.356	6
Day 3		101.080	5.428 ± 0.146	2.578	6	100.256	21.525 ± 0.515	2.279	6
Intra-Day RSD		101.446	5.431 ± 0.186	2.728	18	99.319	21.324 ± 1.063	2.500	18
Day 1	Urine	100.893	5.418 ± 0.165	2.903	6	99.170	21.292 ± 0.505	2.262	6
Day 2		101.694	5.461 ± 0.177	3.100	6	100.582	21.595 ± 0.311	1.373	6
Day 3		98.417	5.285 ± 0.207	3.703	6	97.987	21.038 ± 0.567	2.553	6
Intra-Day RSD		100.334	5.388 ± 0.228	3.428	18	99.245	21.308 ± 0.692	1.158	
Day 1	Serum	99.459	5.341 ± 0.220	3.942	6	98.495	21.147 ± 0.365	1.647	6
Day 2		102.588	5.509 ± 0.211	3.664	6	100.493	21.576 ± 0.311	1.376	6
Day 3		99.236	5.329 ± 0.099	1.773	6	97.931	21.026 ± 0.563	2.554	6
Intra-Day RSD		100.427	5.393 ± 0.250	0.672	18	98.973	21.250 ± 0.717	1.044	18

Level 1 and 2: 5.37 and 21.47 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$, respectively.^a Recovery (%) = [(found-base)/added] × 100.^b Confidence interval, *t* test.

3.1. Analytical figures of merit

Calibration plot for crescents CS concentration levels from 0.866 to 35.8 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ was assayed applying the developed methodology. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the calibration plot and optimized experimental conditions, which sustain the proposed procedure for quantification of CS traces. The limits of detection (LOD) and quantification (LOQ) were calculated in accordance to the formulas given by the official compendia methods [33], using the relation $k(\text{SD})/m$ where $k=3.3$ for LOD and 10 for LOQ. SD represents the standard deviation from 15 replicate blank responses and m is the slope of the calibration curve.

3.2. Interference study

In trade, CS is available in mixtures together with metsulfuron-methyl. Therefore, in order to evaluate the possible interferences caused by other sulfonylureas, metsulfuron-methyl spectral analysis was carried on in the same CS determination conditions. It was not observed chemical interferences and spectral overlaps.

3.3. Validation and applications

In order to evaluate the versatility of the developed methodology, recovery studied was conducted on 25 μL of biological samples and 100 μL water dopped with 0.00, 8.98 and 17.9 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ CS; prepared system were analyzed applying General procedure. Levels of added CS were chosen in accordance of the range of linearity of the proposed methodology and current legislation.

The repeatability of the method was evaluated by repeating the proposed approach 3 times for each addition in a total of three levels of spiked CS for each sample (serum $R^2=0.999$; plasma $R^2=0.978$; water sample $R^2=0.987$). The recoveries of CS are illustrated in Table 2. The results obtained showed a satisfactory agreement with good precision.

Considering a statistically non-significant decrease in the content of the analyte, intermediate precisions are calculated by means of an analysis of variances (ANOVA). This precision level includes the method variability and the variance contribution between days. The samples were analyzed on three non-consecutive days to determine the precision or repeatability. Table 3 reported the study of precision on three samples of water, urine and serum. Results showed a good intermediate precision for CS

determination and acceptable recovery in all studied cases.

4. Conclusions

The methodology proposed represents an alternative to conventional methods to CS monitoring with a lower operational cost and a suitable limit of detection. Among the experimental parameters, nature and concentration of fluorescent complexing, buffer pH and most favorable buffer concentration were studied and optimized. The developed technique was validated using the standard addition method and applied to diverse biological and water samples with successfully results, showing ample applicability. Samples spiked with a known quantity of CS were analyzed to demonstrate the absence of interferences and to provide a check of recovery efficiency near $100 \pm 2\%$. Furthermore, no interferences with other sulfonylurea herbicides are demarcated. Precision and accuracy were tested through an analysis of variances (ANOVA) with adequate results. Taking into account the generation of low amounts of waste, the care of the analyst and the environment, the present proposal represent a contribution to green analytical chemistry.

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