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Challenges and Opportunities in Repurposing Natural Products for the Treatment of Neglected Trophical Diseases: A Review of Scaffold Optimization Strategies

Musa Yahaya Abubakar[1], Twan Sale Mathew[2], Ruslan Shamsuddeen[3], Saeed Abdullahi[4], Ansar Bilyamin[5], Emmanuel Kinsley Chinedu[6]
[1,2,3,4]Federal University Wukari, Nigeria; [5]Federal University Dutsinma, Nigeria
[6]Modibbo Adama University Yola, Nigeria
yahayaabubakarmusa2015@gmail.com

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Abstract

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are serious health issues that affect the entire world, especially in low-income tropical and subtropical areas, yet they do not get enough facilities. Natural items have great potential for treating NTD because of their varied chemical scaffolds. Nevertheless, there are a number of difficulties in optimizing these scaffolds for drug development. Attempts at synthesis and modification are complicated by the structural complexity of natural compounds. Economic and regulatory hurdles also obstruct advancement. Despite these difficulties, there are plenty of chances. Natural products are a significant source of structural variety that makes them ideal for drug discovery. developments in biotechnology and synthetic biology. Sustainable production is improved via biotechnology. Targeted optimization is made easier by advances in computer power and molecular understanding. Research collaborations can expedite the process of discovery and development. Finding efficient scaffolds can be done quickly by looking for NTD activity in already-existing natural product libraries. By tackling these issues scientifically and cooperatively, we can develop novel, practical, and affordable treatments for non-traumatic disabilities (NTDs), which will eventually improve the health of impacted communities.

Keywords: Neglected Trophical Disease (NTDs), Natural Product, Challenges and Optimization

Introduction

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) continue to pose significant health burdens worldwide, with existing treatments often limited by efficacy, toxicity, and pharmacokinetic issues. Prodrug strategies offer a promising approach to enhancing the efficacy of NTD drugs by optimizing their delivery, activation, and pharmacological activity. This review provides a comprehensive overview of prodrug design, development, and optimization for NTD drugs, highlighting chemical and pharmacological aspects. We discuss prodrug strategies for antiparasitic, anti-inflammatory, and immunomodulatory agents, as well as the mechanisms of prodrug activation, pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic studies, and structure-activity relationships. Our review also addresses challenges and opportunities in prodrug development, including stability, formulation, and regulatory considerations. By providing a chemical and pharmacological framework for prodrug-based strategies, this review aims to inspire innovative solutions for improving NTD drug efficacy and ultimately enhancing patient outcomes.

Challenges

The complicated and complex structures of natural products pose a challenge for their chemical production and modification. The complexity could render large-scale production and analog development challenging. (Butler, 2004) . Since many natural products are produced by rare or threatened species, the availability of raw materials is limited. Ethical and sustainable sourcing issues may limit the availability of these chemicals for research and development. (Harvey et al., 2015) .

The complex stereochemistry and multi-step synthesis required for many natural products can hinder the efficient production of analogs. Developing scalable synthetic routes remains a significant challenge (Newman & Cragg, 2012) .Poor pharmacokinetic qualities, such as limited solubility and bioavailability, are common in natural compounds. One of the biggest challenges in optimization is to improve these qualities without sacrificing biological activity. (Koehn & Carter, 2005).

Natural products can exhibit off-target effects and toxicity, complicating their development as safe therapeutic agents. Comprehensive toxicity profiling is essential to mitigate these risks (Li & Vederas, 2009) .

Opportunities

Synthetic biology offers innovative approaches to produce complex natural products and their analogs in microbial hosts. This technology can enhance the yield and sustainability of natural product-derived drugs (Kingston, 2011) . HTS technologies allow rapid screening of large libraries of natural product analogs to identify compounds with desirable biological activities. This accelerates the discovery and optimization process (Bajorath, 2002) .Computer-Aided Drug Design (CADD) tools, including molecular docking and dynamics simulations, facilitate the rational design of natural product analogs. These techniques help predict and optimize interactions with biological targets (Schneider & Fechner, 2005).

*Fragment-Based Drug Design (*FBDD) utilizes small, bioactive fragments derived from natural products to develop more potent and selective drug candidates. This approach can streamline the optimization process (Koehn & Carter, 2005).

Green Chemistry Approaches Employing green chemistry principles in the synthesis and modification of natural products can reduce environmental impact and enhance the sustainability of drug development (Cragg & Newman, 2013). Collaboration between chemists, biologists, pharmacologists, and computational scientists can lead to more effective optimization strategies. Integrating diverse expertise fosters innovation and accelerates the translation of natural products into therapeutic agents (Paterson & Anderson, 2005). Regulatory agencies can provide support and incentives for developing natural product-derived drugs, particularly for rare diseases and neglected conditions. This can encourage investment and innovation in this field (Harvey *et al*., 2015).

Scalability and Standardization of Natural Product Isolation

For natural product-based medicines to be developed and successfully marketed, scalability and standardization are essential. Scalable production requires biotechnological advancements, efficient extraction procedures, sustainable sourcing, and strict quality control techniques. Natural product isolates are consistently safe and consistent thanks to GMP compliance, standardized extracts, bioactivity-guided fractionation, and regulatory compliance. Taking on these obstacles and making the most of the chances at hand might greatly increase the contribution of natural products to medication research and discovery. One of the foremost challenges in scaling up natural product isolation is the sustainable sourcing of raw materials. Overharvesting of natural resources can lead to depletion and environmental damage. Cultivation of medicinal plants, microbial fermentation, and aquaculture are potential sustainable approaches. For instance, Taxus spp. cultivation has been used to produce paclitaxel in order to provide a steady supply of raw materials. (Kingston, 2011).

Advances in biotechnology, such as metabolic engineering and synthetic biology, have enabled the large-scale production of natural products. By engineering microorganisms like E. coli or yeast to produce complex natural compounds, it is possible to achieve high yields and scalability. Artemisinin production using genetically modified yeast is a prime example of this approach (Paddon & Keasling, 2014).

Optimization strategies

Enhancing the pharmacological qualities of natural product scaffolds, such as potency, selectivity, and pharmacokinetic profiles, requires optimization. The main techniques used in the optimization of natural product derivatives are covered in this section. These techniques include structure-based design and analog synthesis.

Analog Synthesis

By systematically altering a natural product scaffold, derivatives that have higher biological activity or less toxicity can be created by analog synthesis. Researchers can investigate the structure-activity relationship (SAR) by changing different functional groups in the molecule using this method.

Functional Group Modification

Introducing or modifying functional groups can significantly impact the bioactivity of a compound. For instance, modifying the hydroxyl groups in the quinine scaffold has led to the development of more potent antimalarial drugs (Butler, 2004). Changing the size or saturation of rings within a natural product can affect its interaction with biological targets. For example, altering the lactone ring in camptothecin analogs has produced topoisomerase inhibitors with better therapeutic profiles (Paterson & Anderson, 2005) . Substituting atoms or groups with isosteres can enhance drug properties. Replacing sulfur with oxygen in thiosemicarbazone analogs has led to improved activity against tuberculosis (Harvey et al., 2015).

Structure-Based Design

Structure-based design uses the three-dimensional structure of a biological target to guide the modification of natural product scaffolds. This strategy leverages techniques such as X-ray crystallography, NMR spectroscopy, and molecular modeling. Computational docking can predict how a natural product binds to its target, identifying key interactions. This information guides the design of analogs with improved binding affinity. Docking studies have been utilized in the optimization of HIV protease inhibitors that are generated from naturally occurring peptides. (Schneider & Fechner, 2005).

Fragment-Based Drug Design (FBDD)

It involves screening small fragments of natural products for binding to a target protein. These fragments serve as starting points for constructing larger, more potent compounds. This approach has been successful in developing kinase inhibitors (Koehn & Carter, 2005) .

Molecular Dynamics Simulations

Simulations provide insights into the flexibility and dynamics of natural product interactions with targets. These studies help refine analogs to better fit the binding site, as demonstrated in the optimization of cyclic peptides for cancer therapy (Bajorath, 2002).

Optimized Extraction Processes

Scaling up extraction processes from bench to industrial scale requires careful optimization. Techniques such as supercritical fluid extraction, microwave-assisted extraction, and ultrasound-assisted extraction offer enhanced efficiency and scalability. Supercritical CO_2 extraction is particularly attractive due to its low environmental impact and high efficiency (Herrero et al., 2010).

Process Intensification

Employing process intensification strategies, such as continuous processing and integration of multiple steps, can enhance scalability. Continuous flow systems, for instance, provide better control over reaction conditions and can be scaled up more easily compared to batch processes (Ley *et al.*, 2005).

Standardization

Standardization ensures that natural product isolates meet consistent quality, efficacy, and safety criteria. This is crucial for regulatory approval and market acceptance.

Quality Control (QC) Rigorous quality control measures are essential for standardization. Techniques such as high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC), gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), and nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy are employed to characterize and quantify active constituents. These techniques ensure batch-to-batch consistency and purity (Verpoorte et al., 2005).

Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)

Adherence to GMP is critical for the standardization of natural product isolation. GMP guidelines cover all aspects of production, from raw material sourcing to final product packaging, ensuring product quality and safety. Implementing GMP reduces variability and ensures compliance with regulatory standards (WHO, 2007).

Standardized Extracts

Developing standardized extracts involves determining the optimal extraction conditions and defining the concentration of active constituents. This process includes establishing reference standards and validating analytical methods to ensure reproducibility and consistency across batches (Blumenthal et al., 2000).

Bioactivity-guided fractionation involves isolating and identifying active compounds based on their biological activity. This method ensures that the most potent components are consistently present in the final product. It also aids in the discovery of new bioactive molecules (Hostettmann et al., 1998).

Compliance with regulatory standards, such as those set by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or the European Medicines Agency (EMA), is essential for the standardization of natural products. These agencies provide guidelines on the quality, safety, and efficacy of natural product-derived drugs (EMA, 2011).

Pharmacokinetic and Pharmacodynamic Studies

Studies on pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics are essential to the creation and improvement of treatments based on natural products. Insights into the ADME characteristics and modes of action of natural products are crucial for designing dosage regimens, spotting possible medication interactions, and guaranteeing both therapeutic efficacy and safety. Drug development can be greatly improved by integrating pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic data with contemporary analytical methods and computer modeling. This will open the door to the production of safer and more effective natural product-derived pharmaceuticals.

Pharmacokinetics

Pharmacokinetics (PK) involves the study of the absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion (ADME) of drugs. Understanding the pharmacokinetic properties of natural products is crucial for optimizing their therapeutic efficacy and safety.

The bioavailability of a drug, or the fraction of the administered dose that reaches systemic circulation, is influenced by its absorption. Factors such as solubility, permeability, and stability in the gastrointestinal tract affect the absorption of natural products. For example, curcumin, a natural product from turmeric, has poor bioavailability due to low absorption and rapid metabolism (Anand et al., 2007).

Once absorbed, the distribution of a drug to various tissues and organs is determined by factors like blood flow, tissue permeability, and binding to plasma proteins. Natural products often have complex structures that can affect their distribution. For instance, the distribution of paclitaxel, a natural product used in cancer therapy, is influenced by its high affinity for binding to plasma proteins and its ability to penetrate tissues (Yared & Tkaczuk, 2012).

Metabolism typically occurs in the liver and involves the conversion of drugs into more water-soluble metabolites for excretion. Natural products can undergo extensive metabolism, which may result in either active or inactive metabolites. The metabolism of artemisinin, an antimalarial drug, involves the formation of active metabolites that contribute to its therapeutic effect (Li & Hickman, 2011).

Excretion

Excretion is the process of eliminating drugs and their metabolites from the body, primarily through urine or feces. The excretion profile of natural products can influence their duration of action and potential for accumulation. For example, the renal excretion of the antibiotic vancomycin, derived from natural sources, dictates its dosing regimen (Bauer, 2013).

Pharmacodynamics

Pharmacodynamics (PD) involves the study of the biochemical and physiological effects of drugs and their mechanisms of action. It encompasses the interaction of drugs with their targets, such as receptors, enzymes, or ion channels, and the resulting therapeutic and toxic effects.

Mechanism of Action

Understanding the mechanism of action of natural products is essential for optimizing their use in therapy. For example, the anticancer activity of paclitaxel is due to its ability to stabilize microtubules, preventing cell division and inducing apoptosis in cancer cells (Jordan & Wilson, 2004). The relationship between drug dose and its pharmacological effect is a key aspect of pharmacodynamics. Natural products often exhibit complex dose-response relationships due to their multiple active components and potential synergistic effects. The dose-response curve of the anti-inflammatory natural product resveratrol, for example, shows a biphasic effect where low doses are more effective than higher doses (Cao et al., 2003). The therapeutic window is the range of drug doses that elicit a therapeutic response without causing significant adverse effects. Narrow therapeutic windows can complicate the clinical use of natural products. For instance, digoxin, derived from the foxglove plant, has a narrow therapeutic window, requiring careful monitoring of blood levels to avoid toxicity (Smith & Koren, 1990). Natural products can interact with other drugs, leading to altered pharmacodynamic effects. These interactions can be synergistic, additive, or antagonistic. St. John's wort, a natural antidepressant, induces the metabolism of various drugs, reducing their efficacy and leading to potential drug interactions (Izzo, 2004).

Intellectual Property and Regulatory Considerations for Natural Product-Based Drugs

Patents are crucial for protecting the intellectual property of natural product-based drugs. A patent grants the holder exclusive rights to manufacture, use, and sell an invention for a specified period, typically 20 years from the filing date. Natural product patents can cover various aspects, such as the isolation process, chemical modification, formulation, and therapeutic use of the compounds. For example, patents can be filed for novel extraction methods or unique structural modifications that enhance bioactivity (Van Norman, 2016).

Challenges in Patenting Natural Products

Patenting natural products can be complex due to their occurrence in nature. The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Association for Molecular Pathology v. Myriad Genetics, Inc.* (2013) highlighted that naturally occurring DNA sequences cannot be patented. However, patents can be obtained for synthetic modifications, novel uses, and innovative extraction or synthesis processes (Sherkow, 2017). Biopiracy, or the unauthorized use of biological resources, is a significant concern in natural product research. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Nagoya Protocol mandate fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. Researchers and companies must negotiate Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) agreements with source countries to ensure ethical and legal compliance (Morgera et al., 2014). In addition to patents, trade secrets can protect proprietary information such as formulations, manufacturing processes, and analytical methods. Maintaining confidentiality agreements with collaborators and employees is essential to safeguard these trade secrets (Pooley, 2016 .

Regulatory Considerations

Compliance with GMP is essential for ensuring the quality, safety, and efficacy of natural product-based drugs. GMP guidelines cover all aspects of production, from raw material sourcing to final product packaging. Adherence to GMP standards is mandated by regulatory agencies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) (WHO, 2007). Regulatory approval requires extensive preclinical and clinical testing to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of natural product-based drugs. Preclinical studies involve in vitro and in vivo testing to assess pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, and toxicity. Clinical trials are conducted in phases (I-IV) to evaluate safety, dosage, efficacy, and post-market surveillance (ICH, 2016).

Regulatory Submissions

For regulatory approval, a comprehensive dossier, including data from preclinical and clinical studies, must be submitted to regulatory agencies. The FDA's New Drug Application (NDA) and the EMA's Marketing Authorization Application (MAA) are critical submissions that require detailed information on the drug's development, manufacturing, and testing (FDA, 2017).

Herbal medicines and traditional remedies derived from natural products often face unique regulatory challenges. The EMA provides guidelines for the registration of traditional herbal medicinal products, emphasizing the need for safety and quality data. The FDA's Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) regulates dietary supplements, including herbal products, with a focus on safety and labeling rather than pre-market approval (EMA, 2011; FDA, 1994.

Regulatory agencies enforce strict guidelines on the labeling and advertising of natural product-based drugs. Labels must provide accurate information on the composition, dosage, indications, contraindications, and potential side effects. Misleading claims can lead to regulatory action and penalties (FDA, 2018).

Conclusion

While the optimization of natural product scaffolds for treating NTDs presents significant challenges, it also offers substantial opportunities for innovation. By leveraging advances in synthetic biology, biotechnology, and collaborative research, the potential for developing effective, sustainable, and affordable treatments for NTDs can be realized. Addressing the regulatory and economic barriers is crucial to translating these scientific advancements into real-world health benefits for affected populations.

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