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Chemotherapy and Cancer Pharmacology: Targeted Therapies, Immunotherapy, and Adverse Effects

Lourdes Rodriguez-Fragoso*

Department of Pharmacy, University of the State of Morelos, Cuernavaca, Mexico

Perspective

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***For Correspondence:**
Lourdes Rodriguez-Fragoso, Department of Pharmacy, University of the State of Morelos, Cuernavaca, Mexico

E-mail: mrodriguezf@uaem.mx

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DESCRIPTION

Chemotherapy remains the primary method of cancer treatment, but advancements in cancer pharmacology have led to the development of targeted therapies and immunotherapies, revolutionizing the approach to cancer management. These novel treatments offer improved efficacy and reduced toxicity compared to traditional cytotoxic agents. However, they also present unique challenges, including the management of adverse effects. This article provides an overview of targeted therapies, immunotherapy, and strategies for managing adverse effects in cancer pharmacology.

Targeted therapies are designed to selectively inhibit specific molecules or pathways involved in tumor growth and survival, minimizing damage to healthy cells. These drugs exploit the molecular characteristics of cancer cells, such as genetic mutations, overexpression of growth factors or receptors, and dysregulated signaling pathways. Examples of targeted therapies include Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitors (TKIs), Monoclonal Antibodies (mAbs), and small molecule inhibitors. TKIs block the activity of tyrosine kinases, enzymes that regulate cell growth and proliferation, by binding to their ATP-binding sites. Examples include imatinib for chronic myeloid leukemia and gefitinib for non-small cell lung cancer. Monoclonal antibodies target specific antigens expressed on cancer cells, promoting immune-mediated destruction or inhibiting signaling pathways essential for tumor growth. Trastuzumab targets HER2/neu in breast cancer, while bevacizumab inhibits Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF) in various solid tumors.

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Immunotherapy is a potentially effective way to treat cancer by using the immune system's ability to identify and destroy cancer cells. Immune Checkpoint Inhibitors (ICIs) block inhibitory pathways that suppress T cell activation and enhance antitumor immune responses. Programmed Death-1 (PD-1) inhibitors, such as pembrolizumab and nivolumab, and Programmed Death Ligand-1 (PD-L1) inhibitors, such as atezolizumab and durvalumab, have demonstrated efficacy across multiple cancer types, including melanoma, non-small cell lung cancer, and renal cell carcinoma. Chimeric Antigen Receptor (CAR) T cell therapy involves genetically engineering patient's T cells to express CARs targeting specific tumor antigens, such as CD19 in B cell malignancies. CAR T cell therapy has shown remarkable results in patients with relapsed/refractory leukemia and lymphoma, leading to durable remissions in some cases.

While targeted therapies and immunotherapies offer significant benefits, they are associated with unique adverse effects that require careful management to optimize treatment outcomes and patient quality of life. Adverse effects of targeted therapies may include gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g., nausea, diarrhea), skin toxicities (e.g., rash, hand-foot syndrome), cardiovascular events (e.g., hypertension, thromboembolism), hepatotoxicity, and endocrine abnormalities (e.g., hypothyroidism, hyperglycemia). Monitoring of cardiac function, liver function tests, and thyroid function tests is essential for early detection and management of adverse effects. Skin toxicities can be managed with topical agents, emollients, and dose modifications, while cardiovascular events may require supportive care and antihypertensive medications.

Immunotherapy-related adverse effects, known as Immune-related Adverse Events (irAEs), result from immune activation and can affect virtually any organ system. Common irAEs include dermatologic toxicities (e.g., rash, pruritus), gastrointestinal toxicities (e.g., colitis, diarrhea), endocrine toxicities (e.g., hypothyroidism, hypophysitis), and hepatic toxicities (e.g., hepatitis). Severe irAEs, such as pneumonitis, myocarditis, and neurotoxicity, can be life-threatening and require prompt recognition and management with corticosteroids and immunosuppressive agents. Close monitoring of patients receiving immunotherapy is essential for early identification and treatment of irAEs to prevent serious complications and treatment discontinuation.

Advancements in chemotherapy and cancer pharmacology have transformed the landscape of cancer treatment, offering targeted therapies and immunotherapies that provide improved efficacy and reduced toxicity compared to traditional cytotoxic agents. However, these novel treatments present unique challenges, including the management of adverse effects. Healthcare providers must be vigilant in monitoring patients for adverse effects and implementing strategies to mitigate risks and optimize treatment outcomes. Continued research and innovation in cancer pharmacology are essential for further advancing the field and improving outcomes for patients with cancer.