ANTISENSE STRATEGIES: DELIVERY OF OLIGONUCLEOTIDES BY NON-VIRAL NANOPARTICLES.

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Published in: Nanoparticles for Biotherapeutic Delivery (Volume 1). Joshua D Ramsey & M Laird Forrest, Editors. Future Science Book Series., ISBN (online): 978-1-910420-40-9. 2015; Chapter 1, Pages 6-21. DOI: 10.4155/fseb2013.14.142

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Abstract

Gene silencing approaches have demonstrated high promise for the development of new treatments of diseases caused by the abnormal overexpression of a known gene. However, the in vivo delivery of the gene silencing mediating agents (antisense oligonucleotides and siRNA) is a bottleneck for the success of these innovative treatments. Solutions for their delivery are emerging from the nanomedicines thanks to the extremely active research aiming to find suitable delivery methods. This paper summarizes the main characteristics in term of their composition and structure of the most advanced carriers designed for siRNA and antisense oligonucleotide delivery. It also summarizes the results of the activity produced in vivo by several of these systems. The conclusion highlights open questions and bottlenecks that remain on the way to clinical development at a large scale.

Biography of the authors

Claude Malvy

Claude Paul Malvy, aged 66, is Professor of Biochemistry at the University Paris-Sud. He is in charge of a research group working on artificial regulation of gene expression by oligonucleotides in a CNRS laboratory located inside the Gustave Roussy Institute which is a prestigious european center devoted to treatment and research on cancer.

In the last 15 years he has focused his research on the inhibition by nucleic acids of junction oncogenes, created by chromosomal translocation, taking Ewing sarcoma as a model of junction oncogene cancer. The targeting of the junction at the RNA level is indeed very specific of the tumor cells and this research is now extended to many cancers. He is author and co-author of more than 100 publications in international scientific journals. He is a member of Nucleic Acids Therapeutic's board. Claude P Malvy is the head of the Institute for Higher Biomedical Studies located in Paris-area (IFSBM, <http://www.igr.fr/ifsbm>). The aim of this Institute is to give a formation in biology and medicine to high standard PhD students with an intial degree in hard sciences (physics, mathematics, informatics, chemistry). As a professor he is mainly teaching the basis of cellular biology to IFSBM students.

Christine Vauthier.

Christine VAUTHIER, PhD, is Director of Research at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique). She received her Ph. D. in polymer chemistry in 1986 from the University Louis Pasteur at Strasbourg, France. She joined the University of Paris South, Faculty of Pharmacy in 1987 as a research assistant where she started working on nanomedicines. During her carrier, she was a visiting scientist at the Center for Chemical Controlled Delivery, University of Utah, USA and invited to spend some months at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil. Currently, her research is focused on the design of biodegradable polymer nanoparticles for mucosal and intravenous administration of drugs including antisense oligonucleotides and the siRNA for developing new anticancer therapies.

Introduction

Antisense oligonucleotides (AS-ODN) and small interfering RNA (siRNA) are very promising molecules for the development of specific treatment against cancer [1-4]. However, their systemic in vivo delivery is challenging. The active molecules need to be protected against degradation by nucleases while they also need to be helped to go across the many biological barriers found on their way between the site of administration and the cell cytoplasm where the target molecules are located [2]. Chemical modifications of AS-ODN and siRNA are known to improve their stability in vivo but this is often at the expense of a loss of their activity [2,5]. Chemical modifications on their own are not sufficient to let the molecule to go across all barriers and to penetrate into cells. Alternative methods consist in associating the natural molecules which corresponds to the phosphodiester oligonucleotide with a carrier that will serve as transporter and transfection agent. Nucleic acids as anticancer drugs offer many possibilities. According to the properties of nucleic acids most of their applications are either using the coding properties of nucleic acids or the Watson Crick hybridization properties of nucleic acids. Coding properties fall in the Gene Therapy category and hybridization properties in the oligonucleotide (siRNA, AS-ODN) category. In cancer therapy the gene delivery in cancer cells inside a tumor requires a very high transfection efficiency which can be obtained only by using modified viruses to deliver genes (foreign genes have to be expressed in all cells of the tumor). Oligonucleotide with much shorter sizes than genes can be delivered at thousands copies in these same cells by using chemical vectors with lower transfection efficiency but which do not present the risks endogenous to modified viruses.

The number of proposed systems is impressive in relation to the youth of this area of research [6-12, 52]. In general, they achieved the first challenge which is to protect the nucleic acid fragments against the degradation by nucleases and other provided data are a rather rough description of their physicochemical characteristics. Only few systems were evaluated ahead to demonstrate their potential to deliver siRNA or AS-ODN producing an anticancer effect in vivo using appropriate animal models. The occurrence of a reduction of tumor growth was related to the expected antisense activity of the antisense agent associated with the carrier. The results were extremely promising motivating the rapid development of clinical tests in human with the few formulations that have passed all the preclinical evaluations stages [12-14]. It remains a very hot topic that is developing very fast through the identification of new potential targets and improving the delivery methods [15]. In this review, the first part we will

give a brief description of the different systems that are now in clinics in human or close to clinical testing. The second part described the biological activity of only few systems that are not yet in clinics but showed very promising effect on cancers caused by junction oncogenes.

Delivery systems for siRNA and AS-ODN by the systemic route that have reached advanced stages of development.

Only few synthetic delivery systems have reached an advanced stage of development. The table 1 and 2 give a description of their composition and their structure is described in the figure 1. As indicated in Table 1 and 2, several were already included in clinical trials in human for the delivery of siRNA and AS-ODN by the systemic route. It is noteworthy that the different proposed systems displayed a large variety of composition and structures that matched different groups of nanotechnologies developed as nanomedicine. Those made of polymers including nanospheres and nanocapsules were designed by polymerization of alkylcyanoacrylates used as monomers [16-18] and by methods based on the precipitation of an hydrophobic polymer in very well defined conditions including emulsification-followed by solvent evaporation [19,20]. It is noteworthy that many systems form thanks to the self assembly of their basic components. This can lead to the formation of particles having well defined structures and even, in some cases, internal crystal-like structures (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Schemes of the structures of several systems for the delivery of siRNA as they are proposed in the literature. A: AtuPLEX [30], B: Stable Nucleic Acid Lipid Nanoparticles (LNP) [43], C: Atecollagen-siRNA complexes [40], D: Poly(alkylcyanoacrylate) (PACA) nanocapsules [17,48], E: PACA nanospheres type I [16,51], F: PACA nanospheres type II [18,29,51], G: PACA nanospheres type II targeted [29], H: Nanospheres with cyclodextrines [25], I: Nanospheres with dendrimers [45]. DPhyPE: 1,2-diphytanoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine

Table 1: More advanced Lipid based carriers developed for in vivo delivery of siRNA and ODN

Type of carrier/Name of technology/ Company	Composition	Figure	Nucleic acid	Disease (Status of development)	References
Cationic lipoplexe/ AtuPLEX lipoplex/ Silence Therapeutics	Atu027 Atufect01: multivalent cationic lipid DPhyPE: fusogenic helper lipid, MPEG 2000-DSPE Molar ratio: 50/49/1	A	23mer siRNA against PKN3 Delivery to endothelial cells	Solid Cancer Clinical trials	[30]
Neutral liposomes/ LNP liposomes/ Alnylam Pharma Tekmica Pharma	Amino lipid chosen among more than 50 molecules, DSPC, cholesterol PEG-lipid Molar ratio: 50/10/38.5/1.5	B	Already several targets located in the liver - siRNA targeting hepatic transthyretin (TTR) (ALN-TTR01) - siRNA targeting VEGF (vascular endothelial growth factor) and KSP (kinesin spindle protein) (ALN-VSP02) - siRNA targeting the polo-like kinase 1, (TKM-PLK1) - siRNA targeting apolipoprotein B, (TKM-ApoB) - siRNA targeting PCSK9 (ANL-PCS02) - Viral RNA, Ebola infections (TKM-EBOLA) - siRNA targeting the hepatitis B virus HBV	Transthyretin Amyloide (clinical trial) Liver cancer (clinical trial) Solid cancer and lymphoma (clinical trial) Hypercholesterolemia (clinical trials) Viral infections (Clinical trial)	[26,34]
Lipidoids	- 98N ₁₂ -5(1): five-tailed isomer of triethylenetetramine–laurylaminopropionate with a free internal amine - Cholesterol - mPEG ₂₀₀₀ -C14 Glyceride. Molar ratio: 42:48:10	NP**	Cationic lipid nanoparticle siRNA against PD-L1 gene, double stranded RNA (dsRNA) activating expression gene P21.	Antiviral immunity in kupffer cells Prostate cancer	[35-37]
Squalenoylated particles	Nanoaggregate formed from the self-assembly of squalenoylated siRNA (prodrug)	NP**	siRNA against a junction oncogene Ret/PTC 1	Radio induced thyroid cancer	[38,39]

*DPhyPE: 1,2-diphytanoyl-sn- glycerol-3-phosphoethanolamine

** NP : Not published yet

Table 2: More advanced polymer-based carriers developed for in vivo delivery of siRNA and ODN

Type of carrier/Name of technology	Composition	Ref. to Figure 1	Nucleic acid	Disease (Status of development)	References
Atelocollagen-siRNA complex:	Complexes of atelocollagen (product obtained from the peptidolysis of collagen) with siRNA	C	21-23 mer siRNA, siRNA directed against the alpha p110 subunit of human phosphoinositide 3-hydroxykinase;	metastatic tumors in bone tissue	[40]
Miniature biodegradable matrix Silenseed Ltd	Complex between siRNA and LODER polymer, nature not disclosed	NP*	SiRNA against K-RAS G12D,	Pancreatic cancer, Intratumoral administration	[41]
polyplexe	Poly-electrolyte complex between chitosan or modified chitosan and siRNA	NP*	Very active research on various targets.	Various diseases	[10,21-23]
Nanocapsules PACA	Polymer vesicles Poly(alkylcyanoacrylate) envelope entrapping AS-ODN	D	AS-ODN against the junction oncogene EWS-Fli 1.	Ewing sarcoma (pediatric bone cancer) (Research)	[17]
Nanospheres	Chitosan decorated nanoparticle made of poly(D,L-lactide-co-glycolide) (PLGA). Chitosan was adsorbed on the PLGA core in the course of formation by nanoprecipitation.	NP*	decoy-ODN targeted nuclear factor kappa B (NF- κ B) (proinflammatory cytokine)	Ulcerative colitis (inflammatory disease of the bowel) Oral administration	[20]
Nanospheres	Core-corona nanoparticles made of Poly(alkylcyanoacrylate)-chitosan copolymers	E,F	siRNA against the junction oncogene Ret/PTC AS-ODN or siRNA against EWS-Fli1	Radio-induced thyroid cancer (Research) Ewing sarcoma (pediatric bone cancer) (Research)	[16,18,29]
Targeted nanospheres	Core corona nanoparticle decorated with antibodies	G	siRNA against the junction oncogene EWS-Fli 1.	Ewing sarcoma (pediatric bone cancer) (Research)	[29]
Targeted nanospheres / Calando Pharma	Self-assembly of 4 components siRNA, polycyclodextrine-including positively charged linked between cyclodextrins, PEG-adamantane, Transferrin-PEG-adamantane	H	siRNA reducing expression of RRM2 (previously denoted siR2B15) (CALAA-01)	Myeloid Leukemia clinical trial registration number NCT 00689065	[25, 42]

Table 2: More advanced polymer-based carriers developed for in vivo delivery of siRNA and ODN (Continued)

Type of carrier/Name of technology	Composition	Ref. to Figure 1	Nucleic acid	Pathologies	References
Targeted nanospheres	Complex of cationic dendrimers (poly(propyleneimine) (PPI) or Polyamidoamine (QPAMAM)) with siRNA caged by surface crosslinking with disulfide bonds. Surface is neutral due to addition of PEG. A synthetic analogue of Luteinizing hormone releasing hormone (LHRH) confers specificity to cancer cells.	I	siRNA against BCL2 mRNA	Cancer (Research)	[44,45]

* NP : not published yet

The association of the nucleic acid is achieved by promoting ionic interactions between their negative charged given by the phosphate group and positively charged components of the carrier [10,21-23] . The whole structure is also assembled by strong hydrophobic interactions between components which include fatty acid chains of lipids [13], the squalene motive of the squalenoylated siRNA [24] and the use of cyclodextrines [25].

To be active in vivo, nanomedicines designed to deliver gene silencing effectors need to remain stable in biological fluids during transportation from the site of administration down to the target site while it should dissociate to release the nucleic acid once it has reached the interior of the cell. The stability of systems needs to be tuned very precisely to achieve the right balance between these contradictory properties. For instance, over 50 different amino lipids were tested in the formulation of the nucleic acid lipid nanoparticles (LNP) which are developed as a delivery platform for siRNA to find the optimal compromise [26]. This system is now under evaluation in clinics for various siRNA targets to treat diseases in the liver [27]. In the case of the ATUPlex, the second advanced delivery platform which is also based on a lipid self assembly SiRNA are inserted into bilayers of cationic lipids. The whole complex which occurs as a very small particle is stabilized by chains of poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG). Although used to insure the colloidal stability of the nanoparticles, PEG was used to decorate the surface of many types of carriers to confer them stealth properties. It is a method for camouflaging nanomedicine surfaces to hamper recognition of by the immune system of the host organism. In this way, the delivery system circulates in the blood compartment and reaches tumors thanks to the enhanced permeation and retention effect or it can be used to target vascular endothelial cells. Recently it was shown that PEG is not the only hydrophilic polymer that can be used to camouflage the surface of nanomedicines. Polysaccharides can be used too to design stealth nanoparticles provided that the chains adopt a hair configuration on the surface of the nanomedicine and that the grafting density is high enough [18,28,29].

To improve delivery into cells, several systems were including a ligand to promote transfection by fusion with the cell membrane. For instance, the fusion peptide GALA was inserted in the structure of the squalenoylated delivery platform using a cholesterol moiety grafted on this peptide [24]. In the AtuPLEX, the fusogenic molecule is the 1,2-diphytanoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine (DPhyPE) [30]. Another type of decoration of the particle surface includes the insertion of a targeting ligand. It was transferrin in the case of the cyclodextrin-based system [25] or a monoclonal antibody associated on the surface of poly(alkylcyanoacrylate) nanoparticles [29]. The platforms were designed in such a way that the targeting moiety can be interchangeable. In the cyclodextrin based system, cyclodextrins are exhibited on the surface of the carrier and serve as anchor for the targeting ligand onto

which an adamantane residue is grafted (Figure 2A). Attachment of the targeting ligand on the poly(alkylcyanoacrylate) nanoparticles was achieved using a biotin-avidin-biotin sandwich system [31]. The platform consists in biotinylated nanoparticles and targeting ligands are biotinylated as well. The assembly between these two partners is achieved by simple incubation with avidin (Figure 2B). The number of targeting antibody molecules associating with a single nanoparticle was low, 3 to 5 units, but this low number was sufficient to increase the delivery of the cargo to target sites *in vivo* after intravenous injection and to improve treatment efficacy [32]. The low number of targeting ligand required is an advantage regarding the modification of surface properties of the carrier introduced by the addition of the targeting ligands. Indeed, it remained low enough to preserve the stealthiness of the nanoparticles as acknowledged by the low capacity to activate the complement system of both the targeted and the parent nanoparticles and by the increased delivery of the cargo to tumor with the targeted nanoparticles. Surface properties of carriers are determinant for the *in vivo* fate of the nanoparticles.

Figure 2: Mode of association of a targeting ligand to delivery systems for siRNA. A: Biotin-avidin-biotin sandwich system [29,31], B: adamantane-cyclodextrin association [25], C: chemical coupling [45]. Targeting ligands are easily interchangeable on the different delivery platforms.

Although surface properties must be designed precisely to achieve the correct biodistribution of the cargo, results from an extensive study of the influence of surface properties on the cytotoxicity and genotoxicity of carriers have pointed out that they can compromise the safety of the carrier [33]. A clear correlation was highlighted between the surface charge of the particles and their cytotoxicity. The same observation was reported regarding the evaluation of the genotoxicity of the particles through the formation of micronuclei in cells in contact with non cytotoxic concentration of the particles. It was suggested that newly designed carriers should display neutral or negatively charged surface to reduce such a risk of genotoxicity.

Examples of biological activity

All the nanoparticles-siRNA or antisense oligonucleotide listed in the table have been used successfully in biological systems either in cell culture or in vivo or both. Taking into account the diversity of their chemical nature it is very difficult to describe a unified common mechanism of action in vivo. However, in the cancer field one common point could be the Enhancement of Permeability Retention effect (EPR effect) which facilitates the uptake of nanoparticles by tumors taking into account the fenestrated nature of the tumor vascular endothelium. As examples we describe here some of the biological results obtained with squalenes, poly(alkylcyanoacrylate) nanoparticles and lipoplexes

A siRNA targeting the fusion oncogene RET/PTC1, which is the most prevalent type of gene rearrangement found in papillary thyroid carcinoma, at the level of the mRNA junction of RET and PTC1 was coupled to squalene. It formed 200 nm nanoparticles as already shown [38]. Ali *et al.* [24] found that these nanoparticles carrying the siRNA inhibit in vivo with specificity RET/PTC1 at the level of mRNA and protein as well as tumor growth. The in vivo model used was a mouse xenograft of human BHP 10-3 SC mice cells expressing the RET/PTC1 oncogene. The total dose of siRNA delivered intravenously was 0.5 mg/Kg. At the same dose the same siRNA without squalene has no effect on tumor growth and expression of RET/PTC1.

Nanospheres of PIBCA coated with chitosan and carrying a siRNA targeting RET/PTC1 were used by De Martimprey to treat mice having received a xenograft of tumorigenic murine cells stably expressing the human RET/PTC1. Either by intratumor [46] or by intravenous delivery [18] inhibition of RET/PTC1 expression and of tumor growth was obtained at a low dose of siRNA. Similar nanospheres have been used to carry either antisense oligonucleotide [16] or a siRNA [29] anti EWS/Fli-1 in preclinical models of Ewing sarcoma. With antisense oligonucleotides tumor (NIH3T3 cells expressing EWS/Fli-1) inhibition takes place after

intratumor injection (5 mg/Kg total oligonucleotide dose) [16] or after intravenous injection (30 mg/Kg total oligonucleotide dose) [47]. With siRNA a 40 % inhibition of EWS/Fli1 in the tumor (A673 human Ewing cells) is obtained with the nanospheres but is increased to near 80 % when the nanospheres are coupled to an antibody against CD99, a biomarker of Ewing cells (100 µg total dose siRNA by IV injection). Interestingly, results from the group of Malvy [47] show that, in addition to delivery, nanoparticles can sometimes erase unspecific polyanionic effects of nucleic acids.

PIBCA nanocapsules were used with antisense oligonucleotides targeting EWS/Fli-1 in cell culture (NIH3T3 cells expressing EWS/Fli-1). Nanocapsules greatly increased the cellular uptake of oligonucleotides allowing the inhibition of EWS/Fli-1 and of the cell proliferation [48]. The same nanocapsules were used to deliver siRNA targeting EWS/Fli-1 directly in the xenografted tumor [17]. At 1 mg/Kg total siRNA dose inhibition of EWS/Fli-1 expression as well as inhibition of tumor growth were observed.

Aleku et al. have used a siRNA targeting the protein kinase N3 in endothelial cells. This siRNA is associated to a lipoplex and the corresponding siRNA nanoparticle is called Atu027. Antimetastatic activity in different types of cancers in preclinical models has been shown by Aleku *et al.* [49] and Santel *et al.* [50].

Conclusion

Gene silencing approaches have now demonstrated their promise to develop efficient treatments of diseases caused by the abnormal over expression of a known gene. In vivo delivery of gene silencing mediating agents that include antisense oligonucleotides and siRNA remains the bottleneck for the success of treatments, but solutions are emerging thanks to the extremely active research aiming to find suitable delivery methods. As pointed out in this paper, several types of carriers have been identified and their clinical development is already on the way. Although tremendous progresses were made in a very short time, several challenges remain as we are still in the infant age developing therapeutic strategies based on gene silencing approaches. For instance, mechanisms by which the gene silencing activity is achieved in vivo need to be elucidated. It is also not understood so far why in vitro effect did not always correlate well with the observed in vivo effect and can even be contradictory in the sense that activity was only observed in vivo. We also need to improve our understanding of the biodistribution of nanocarriers that are designed to deliver antisense oligonucleotides and siRNA and their interactions with the immune system of the host. Another bottleneck can be the finding of relevant gene silencing mediators improving their specificity on the expression of the target gene and avoiding off target effects. In this regard, antisense oligonucleotides

and siRNA targeting junction oncogenes that are unique in the diseased cells and not present in the healthy cells are probably advantageously targeted for the development of therapeutic approached based on this method. Today, many hopes are based on research conducted in this area. For sure nanomedicines will contribute further to the development of these compounds and their success proposing new treatments to patients.

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Key terms

Antisense strategy: Classical drugs are protein inhibitors interacting directly with the active site of a protein. Antisense strategies aim at inhibiting with specificity the synthesis of a given protein. It can be triple helices at the level of DNA or double helices at the level of mRNA. Usually, these double helices lead to the mRNA cleavage and degradation through either RNaseH or RISC complex

Oligonucleotides: Short fragments of nucleic acids occurring as oligodesoxynucleotides and ribonucleic acids. These fragments can interfere with the expression of a specific gene thanks the complementarity of their sequence with the target gene or the target mRNA. In the cells, they are part of physiologic mechanisms occurring for the regulation of gene expression.

Antisense Oligonucleotide (AS-ODN): Short fragment of a single chain of oligodesoxynucleotide having a sequence complementary to a target gene or a target mRNA. They can be used to block the expression of the gene in the nucleus by formation of a triple helix on the complementary sequence of DNA found on the corresponding chromosome. They can compromise the production of a protein by blocking the translation of the mRNA forming a complex with the complementary sequence found on the target mRNA. In this case, the translation of the mRNA into the protein is compromised either because the mRNA is then degraded by the RNaseH or because the AS-ODN-mRNA complex formed hindered the association or the progression of the ribosome which is required for the synthesis of the protein.

Small interfering RNA (siRNA): Short fragment of double strands ribonucleic acid. One of the strand, the antisense strand, has a complementary sequence to that of the target mRNA. This strand associates with a group of proteins to form the RISC complex while the second strand, the sense strand, is degraded. Once formed, the RISC complex displays an RNase activity against the mRNA complementary to the antisense strand of the siRNA. This leads to the degradation of the mRNA targeted by the siRNA hence to the inhibition of the production of the corresponding protein.

Non-viral nanoparticles: In contrast with drug carriers designed from viruses, non-viral nanoparticles are drug carriers obtained by designing artificial nanoparticles from a drug and eventually other materials that include in general either lipids or polymers.

Chapter summary

- Gene silencing approaches have demonstrated high promise for the development of new treatments of diseases caused by the abnormal expression of a known gene.
- Non-viral nanoparticles including lipid and polymer-based nanoparticles were identified to make possible in vivo delivery of biologically active gene silencing agents.
- Clinical developments have started with several systems considering development of treatments against various cancers, viral infections and hypercholesterolemia.
- The development of therapeutic strategies based on gene silencing approaches is still in its infant age and many challenges remain