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STIMULI-RESPONSIVE NANOCARRIERS FOR TARGETED DRUG DELIVERY: FROM FUNDAMENTAL MECHANISMS TO CLINICAL TRANSLATION

Naveen I.[1], Mohammed Musraf A.[1]*, Dr. R. Sambath Kumar[1]

[1]Department of Pharmaceutics, The Erode College of Pharmacy, Veppampalayam, Erode- 638 112, Tamilnadu, India, Affiliated to the Tamilnadu Dr. M. G. R Medical University, Chennai, India.

***Corresponding Author: Mohammed Musraf A.**

Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, The Erode college of Pharmacy, Veppampalayam, Erode- 638 112, Tamilnadu, India, Affiliated to the Tamilnadu Dr. M. G. R Medical University, Chennai, India.

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ABSTRACT

Conventional pharmacotherapy often faces limitations such as low aqueous solubility, non-specific biodistribution, rapid clearance, and systemic toxicity, which limit the availability of active agents at the target site. In the last two decades, stimuli-responsive nanocarriers have emerged as a promising solution, nanoscale drug delivery mechanisms with molecular switches that can respond to certain biochemical or physical characteristics of the diseased microenvironment to trigger targeted drug release. This review compiles the existing knowledge of these systems, classifying them according to the triggering signal type and summarizing their design logic, chemistry, and performance. The endogenous (internal) triggers discussed are pH gradients, redox state imbalances, and overexpression of degradative enzymes like matrix metalloproteinases. Unlike endogenous mechanisms, exogenous (external) triggers including heat, light, ultrasound, and magnetic fields allow clinicians greater temporal and spatial control. The review compares structural platforms used to build these carriers, such as liposomes, polymeric micelles and nanoparticles, dendrimers, hydrogels, gold nanostructures, and quantum dots, assessing their load capacity, biocompatibility, and surface functionalization. We also discuss dual- and multi-stimuli-responsive designs that integrate more than one trigger within a single carrier for improved precision, and applications in oncology, inflammatory arthritis, gene therapy and neurological disorders. Finally, the review discusses key translational hurdles—anatomical and physiological challenges, toxicological profiling demands, manufacturing intricacies, and the lack of standardized evaluation methods—and proposes research priorities to accelerate clinical uptake of these technologies.

KEYWORDS: Stimuli-responsive nanocarriers; pH-responsive; redox-responsive; enzyme-responsive; inflammatory arthritis; cancer nanomedicine.

1. INTRODUCTION

Drug therapy will only work as long as the drug gets to the tissue it's supposed to reach and the concentration is high enough to work but not so high that it would kill the healthy cells. In most small molecules and biologic drugs, this balance is challenging to achieve with conventional oral, topical, or intravenous drug delivery, as the drug is delivered systemically based on its own physicochemical properties, not the site of the disease. This approach creates a more limited therapeutic range than what clinicians would like and side effects that limit the dosage that can be given within a safe range.[1,4,31]

For over 30 years, nanotechnology has been suggested as a potential partial answer to this situation. To overcome these limitations, the pharmacokinetics can be modified by encapsulating or conjugating a drug to a nanoscale carrier, which will avoid the drug's premature degradation, and, in the case of tumors and inflamed tissue, by taking advantage of the enhanced permeability and retention phenomenon, where nanoscale particles accumulate preferentially in leaky, poorly drained vasculatures.[3]

But simply being passive is insufficient to ensure the drug is delivered upon arrival; its carrier must be moderately stable to release its contents at the destination. To overcome this problem, stimuli-responsive, or "smart," nanocarriers were developed. A trigger is required to induce the abrupt change in at least one physicochemical property (solubility, charge, conformation, or covalent bond), either an endogenous or internal trigger (from the diseased tissue) or an exogenous/external trigger (from the outside of the body by the clinician's deliberate action).[4,5]

In the late 1970s, the idea was first clinically applied to the thermosensitive liposome and has since been expanded to include pH, redox potential, specific enzymes, temperature, light, ultrasound, and magnetic field-responsive carriers, singly or in combination.[2]

The mechanism of action of each class of stimulus is reviewed here, and a summary of the major material platforms currently employed to build responsive carriers is given along with a discussion of the application of these systems to three areas of clinical interest that have generated much interest: oncology, inflammatory arthritis, and, in recent years, gene therapy and neurological disease. The review concludes with a critical examination of other barriers that must be overcome to bring laboratory prototypes to market as officially licensed medicines.

2. DESIGN RATIONALE FOR STIMULI-RESPONSIVE DRUG DELIVERY

The initial step in any stimulus-responsive carrier is to determine that the diseased tissue is different in its biology from normal tissue that can be considered a targeting signal. The extracellular pH in solid tumours is about one unit lower than that of normal blood, as well as having high levels of certain proteases and a far more reducing intracellular environment than the extracellular space.[4]

Similarly, disease-affected joints have a parallel, although different, pattern with regard to the changes in synovial fluid and synovial and subchondral bone: the pH drops to between 6.6 and 7.2, from a normal range of approximately 7.4–7.8, and degradative enzymes like matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and cathepsins are elevated in the synovium and subchondral bone, while the intracellular antioxidant system is overwhelmed by the accumulation of reactive oxygen species (ROS).[1,32]

A responsive carrier is formed by adding a chemical or structural component that is selectively responsive to one of these signals to a stable nanocarrier structure. All of the above general mechanisms are reported in the literature and involve either protonation or deprotonation of ionizable groups, which changes the hydrophilic–hydrophobic balance of an amphiphilic polymer and thus leads to disruption of the micelle; cleavage of a covalent linker (ester, hydrazone, disulfide, or peptide bond), which releases the drug either by itself or damages the structural integrity of the carrier; or a physical phase transition, such as the coil-to-globule collapse of a thermoresponsive polymer above its lower critical solution temperature, or photoisomerization or photolysis of a chromophore that changes its polarity or connectivity on exposure to light, thus disrupting the micelle. In both cases the carrier should be able to retain its integrity in the physiological pH, temperature, and redox potential and must be able to respond quickly and completely once it reaches diseased tissue and/or is triggered by an external stimulus.[4,5]

3. INTERNAL (ENDOGENOUS) STIMULI-RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

3.1 pH-Responsive Nanocarriers

The most studied endogenous trigger is pH, mostly because the pH gradients related to disease are well described and reproducible. Two complementary chemical approaches are utilized to prepare pH-responsive carriers. The first is based on polymers with ionizable pendant groups-weak acids, such as carboxylic acids, or weak bases, such as tertiary amines and imidazole- that are charged and hydrophilic at one pH and neutral and hydrophobic at another. Common examples include poly (β-amino ester) s, poly(histidine), and poly[2-(diisopropylamino)ethyl methacrylate]. As the surrounding pH decreases below the pKa of the polymer, the amine groups become protonated, which increases the hydrophilicity and osmotic swelling of the polymer, which destabilizes the core of the micelle or nanoparticle, leading to the release of the entrapped drug.[5,23] The second approach is based on an acid-labile covalent bond (most often hydrazone, acetal, orthoester or imine) either between the drug and the carrier or in the backbone of an amphiphilic block copolymer. Hydrolysis of this bond at mildly acidic pH values (5.0–6.5, corresponding to the tumor interstitium, inflamed synovium, or the endosomal and lysosomal compartments) results in direct release of the active agent.[5]

Herein, pH-responsive devices have been developed to act on three anatomically diverse sites in the setting of inflammatory arthritis. A metal-organic framework modified with hyaluronic acid and loaded with the antioxidant protocatechuic acid exhibited markedly reduced drug release at physiological pH but a sharp increase when the pH dropped to around 5.6 at the cartilage surface, coincident with the binding of the released cargo to CD44 receptors on chondrocytes.[9] In cultured synovial fibroblasts, micelles of methoxy-poly (ethylene glycol)-polypropylene fumarate laden with ibuprofen and targeted to the synovium released ibuprofen via acid-catalyzed hydrolysis of an anhydride linkage and suppressed prostaglandin E2 synthesis.[9]

A bisphosphonate-modified nanocellulose composite with β-tricalcium phosphate was designed to selectively degrade in the acidic environment created by resorbing

osteoclasts at the subchondral bone-osteoclast interface where osteoclasts create a highly acidic microenvironment near pH 4.5, thereby inhibiting further osteoclast formation and enhancing bone regeneration.[15] Besides arthritis, the application of pH-responsive polymeric micelles for the administration of doxorubicin in malignancy has been intensively studied. Poly (ethylene glycol)-b-poly[2-(diisopropylamino) ethyl methacrylate] micelles are stable at physiological pH but disassemble quickly at pH 5.0 (approximately the pH of the late endosome), resulting in intracellular release of doxorubicin and greater cytotoxicity than the free drug in cultured cancer cells.[23]

The equivalent benefits of hydrazone-linked hyaluronic acid–doxorubicin conjugates and pH-sensitive liposomes with acid-triggered targeting peptides in glioma models also underscore the use of pH as a trigger in diverse disease conditions.[3]

3.2 Redox and ROS-Responsive Nanocarriers

Redox-responsive systems exploit the substantial difference in reducing potential between the oxidizing extracellular space and the strongly reducing intracellular cytosol, which contains glutathione (GSH) at millimolar concentrations roughly a thousand-fold higher than in plasma; tumor and inflamed tissue further show elevated intracellular GSH relative to healthy cells, and inflammatory cells and chondrocytes generate excess reactive oxygen species as part of the pathological process.[4,24] Two chemical mechanisms are used to translate this differential into drug release. The first, termed bond fracture, incorporates disulfide, diselenide, or boronate ester linkages into the carrier backbone or as crosslinks between core and shell; these bonds are stable in the oxidizing extracellular milieu but are cleaved reductively by intracellular GSH or oxidatively by elevated ROS, disassembling the carrier.[4] The second, termed "amphiphilic transition," uses ROS-oxidizable moieties such as thioether, phenylboronic ester, or selenide groups that convert from hydrophobic to hydrophilic upon oxidation, again destabilizing the micelle structure.

In inflammatory arthritis, disulfide-crosslinked nanoparticles carrying the anti-inflammatory peptide KAFAK reduced interleukin-6 secretion by chondrocytes and showed promise as an intra-articular injectable for osteoarthritis, although concerns remain about the premature reaction of exposed disulfide bonds with extracellular cysteine.[1] A phenylboronate–cyclodextrin nanoparticle loaded with dexamethasone accumulated selectively in the inflamed joints of mice with collagen-induced arthritis and suppressed the iRhom2–TNF-α–BAFF signalling axis implicated in synovial inflammation.[11] A particularly inventive design used the Fenton-type reaction between hydrogen peroxide and ferrous chloride to acidify the interior of a hollow microsphere, which in turn decomposed embedded sodium bicarbonate to generate carbon dioxide gas; the resulting pressure ruptured the microsphere shell and released dexamethasone sodium phosphate with a greater local anti-inflammatory effect than the free drug in an osteoarthritic mouse model.[8] A related folate-targeted, catalase-conjugated liposome exploited elevated intracellular hydrogen peroxide to generate oxygen and disrupt the liposomal bilayer, releasing methotrexate selectively into activated macrophages.[30]

Redox-responsive carriers have also proved useful in oncology, where the GSH gradient between plasma and cytosol is even more pronounced. Doxorubicin-loaded, disulfide-crosslinked poly (ethylene glycol)–poly(amidoamine) dendrimer conjugates combine pH and redox responsiveness, releasing the majority of their payload only once both endosomal acidification and cytosolic reduction have occurred, thereby minimizing premature leakage during circulation.[24] Despite these successes, the field faces several unresolved issues: the sensitivity of a given chemistry to ROS varies with polymer structure and exposure time, the biocompatibility of redox-active materials must be confirmed to avoid triggering additional inflammation, and materials must be designed to discriminate reliably between the modest ROS fluctuations of normal cell metabolism and the substantially elevated ROS levels that characterize disease.[1]

3.3 Enzyme-Responsive Nanocarriers

Enzymes offer a highly specific trigger because their substrate recognition is governed by well-defined peptide or ester sequences, allowing formulators to design cleavage sites that respond selectively to a single enzyme or enzyme family. An enzyme-responsive nano-drug delivery system typically comprises two elements: a nanomaterial scaffold containing an enzyme-cleavable segment and a therapeutic payload attached through a biodegradable bond or retained by electrostatic or hydrophobic interaction within the carrier core.[1,10] Upon contact with the target enzyme, cleavage of the sensitive segment triggers size shrinkage, a switch in surface charge, activation of a masked targeting ligand, or outright fragmentation of the carrier, each of which can precipitate drug release.[1]

Matrix metalloproteinases (MMP-2, -3, -9, -12, and -13) and a disintegrin and metalloproteinase with thrombospondin motifs (ADAMTS) are overexpressed throughout the arthritic joint and have been used most frequently as triggers. A peptide constructed by linking an anti-inflammatory tripeptide sequence to a cell-penetrating peptide and an MMP-2/9-cleavable spacer decorated with an RGD targeting motif produced greater suppression of TNF-α, IL-6, and nitric oxide in inflammatory macrophages than the parent peptide alone and reduced paw swelling and serum cytokines in an adjuvant-induced arthritis mouse model.[28] A nanoparticle-hydrogel hybrid built from the small hydrophilic-lipophilic molecule triglycerol monostearate was engineered so that the zinc ion within the MMP

active site catalyzes hydrolysis of an ester bond in the hydrogel matrix, releasing the corticosteroid triamcinolone acetonide in proportion to local MMP activity—effectively coupling drug release to disease flare severity.[7] At the subchondral bone, MMP-sensitive nanocapsules originally developed to deliver bone morphogenetic protein-2 for fracture repair illustrate how the same responsive shell chemistry could, in principle, be repurposed to correct the abnormal bone remodeling seen in arthritis.[29]

Beyond MMPs, enzyme-responsive design has extended to cathepsin-, hyaluronidase-, and protease-cleavable systems in oncology. A dual enzyme-responsive HPMA copolymer–doxorubicin conjugate incorporated both a cathepsin-B-cleavable tetrapeptide spacer to liberate the drug intracellularly and an MMP-2-cleavable linker to unmask an iRGD targeting peptide, improving tumor penetration and cytotoxicity in three-dimensional prostate cancer cultures.[27] A conceptually related pre-enzyme drug therapy strategy separates the enzyme-sensitive prodrug from the activating enzyme, administering each as a distinct nanoparticle so that activation occurs only once both components have co-localized within the target tissue, thereby minimizing systemic toxicity.[1]

4. EXTERNAL (EXOGENOUS) STIMULI-RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

Endogenous triggers are convenient because they require no additional equipment, but their magnitude and distribution cannot be controlled once the carrier has been administered. External stimuli—heat, light, ultrasound, and magnetic fields—restore a measure of clinician control: the trigger can be applied only when and where it is needed, its intensity and duration can be adjusted in real time, and it can, in principle, be switched on and off repeatedly over the course of treatment.[1,21,32]

4.1 Thermo-Responsive Nanocarriers

Thermoresponsive carriers rely on polymers that undergo a sharp coil-to-globule phase transition at a defined lower critical solution temperature (LCST). Poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) (PNIPAM), first described in 1967, remains the most extensively studied example, alongside poly(N-vinylisobutyramide), poly(2-oxazolines), and elastin-like polypeptides.[1,3] Below the LCST, the polymer chain is hydrated and hydrophilic; once the local temperature rises slightly above the LCST—whether from externally applied heat such as radiofrequency ablation, microwave hyperthermia, or high-intensity focused ultrasound or from the mild hyperthermia that is intrinsic to inflamed or tumor tissue—the chain dehydrates, collapses, and expels the entrapped drug.[1,31,33]

A thermoresponsive nanosphere built from a Pluronic F127–chitosan oligosaccharide conjugate and loaded with both diclofenac and the chondrogenic small molecule kartogenin exhibited a diameter of roughly 650 nm at 4 °C but only 305 nm at 37 °C, indicating that local cooling loosened the nanosphere architecture and accelerated drug release; the dual-drug system suppressed lipopolysaccharide-induced inflammation in chondrocytes and macrophage-like cells in vitro and reduced synovial inflammation while delaying disease progression in osteoarthritic rats.[1] Elastin-like polypeptides fused to the anti-inflammatory protein interleukin-1 receptor antagonist have likewise been investigated as an intra-articular depot, offering the advantage of full biodegradability, which classical PNIPAM-based carriers lack and which has limited their clinical translation. In oncology, temperature-responsive polymeric nanospheres loaded with methotrexate and gold nanoparticles have been proposed as combined imaging and therapeutic (theranostic) agents for rheumatoid arthritis and cancer alike.[1]

4.2 Photo-Responsive Nanocarriers

Light provides unique spatial and temporal control with high precision because the intensity, wavelength, and duration of exposure can all be externally controlled without direct contact with the tissue. Photoresponsive nanocarriers contain chromophores that, upon irradiation, undergo photoisomerization (e.g., azobenzene), photolysis (e.g., o-nitrobenzyl esters), photo crosslinking, or photothermal conversion (usually mediated by gold nanostructures).[1, 4] UV light is poorly penetrating in tissue and is itself cytotoxic or mutagenic. NIR light (700-1000 nm) penetrates much deeper and induces little collateral tissue damage, making it the ideal wavelength range for most therapeutic applications, including the synovial joint.[1,32]

Gold-containing PEG-PLGA nanoparticles loaded with methotrexate and responsive to NIR irradiation suppressed inflammatory cytokine production by activated macrophages in vitro, although this system was not validated in an animal model of arthritis.[1] A more fully developed multifunctional nanoparticle combining a gold half-shell with methotrexate-loaded PLGA demonstrated superior anti-inflammatory activity on fibroblast-like synovial cells and in a collagen-induced arthritis mouse model when combined with NIR irradiation compared with chemotherapy alone and was reported to be easier to synthesize and less toxic than earlier gold-nanorod formulations.[33] In neuro-oncology, cRGD-targeted, NIR-responsive gold nanorod–PEG–poly(caprolactone) hybrid nanoparticles loaded with doxorubicin showed markedly greater drug release, tumor accumulation, and antitumor activity upon NIR irradiation in a glioblastoma xenograft model than an equivalent non-targeted or non-irradiated formulation.[26] Despite these advantages, the biodegradability and long-term safety of several photoactive chromophores, including azobenzene and o-nitrobenzyl derivatives, remain incompletely characterized, and both ultraviolet and NIR light carry some risk of cellular photodamage at sufficiently high fluence.[1,32]

4.3 Ultrasound-Responsive Nanocarriers

Ultrasound is an attractive external trigger for drug release because it combines the benefits of deep tissue penetration, well-established clinical infrastructure, and a record of safety. The majority of ultrasound-responsive systems are based on acoustic cavitation. Gas core microbubbles or nanobubbles oscillate, expand, and finally collapse under the pressure of ultrasound, releasing the encapsulated drug and generating transient pores on the adjacent cell membranes to promote cellular uptake independent of the endocytic pathway.[1] Nanodroplets, liposomes, emulsions, and micelles, nanoscale alternatives to microbubbles, offer increased payload capacity and better tissue penetration than micron-scale bubbles, but the formulation challenge of balancing ultrasonic sensitivity with in vivo stability persists, particularly for polymeric micelles requiring careful tuning of crosslinking to prevent premature release.[1,31,32]

A significant limitation for arthritis applications is that ultrasound is strongly attenuated by bone, complicating its use for deep intra-articular or subchondral targets; nevertheless, ultrasound-assisted transdermal delivery of diclofenac sodium gel has been shown to reduce joint inflammation in an adjuvant-induced arthritis rat model, and combined ultrasound–focused magnetic resonance imaging systems used to guide transcranial drug delivery in animal models suggest a plausible path toward image-guided, ultrasound-triggered release at the joint in the future.[1,33]

4.4 Magnetic-Responsive Nanocarriers

Magnetic nanocarriers, most often built around superparamagnetic iron oxide nanoparticles (SPIONs), offer two independent mechanisms of control: magnetic guidance, in which an external constant magnetic field concentrates circulating nanoparticles at a specific anatomical target, and magnetically induced hyperthermia, in which an alternating magnetic field (AMF) causes the iron oxide core to generate heat, either directly disrupting the carrier or triggering a co-formulated thermoresponsive polymer shell. Because superparamagnetic particles are not permanently magnetized, they do not aggregate within the bloodstream and can therefore circulate freely until an external field is applied, an important safety advantage over ferromagnetic alternatives.[1]

In rheumatoid arthritis, magnetically targeted PLGA gold/iron/gold half-shell nanoparticles loaded with methotrexate and functionalized with an RGD targeting peptide were developed for combined magnetic targeting and photothermal drug release, demonstrating the layering of magnetic and photothermal triggers within a single carrier.[33] More generally, research into magnetic nanoparticles in the setting of arthritis is still far less advanced than in the case of oncology, where magnetic guidance and hyperthermia have been investigated for more than 20 years. The optimal characteristics of a magnetically responsive delivery system, including adequate magnetic responsiveness to allow perfusion at the capillary level, minimal toxicity and antigenicity, and maximal biocompatibility and biodegradability, offer a template that future designs focused on arthritis will likely seek to emulate.[2]

5. NANOCARRIER PLATFORMS USED TO BUILD RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

The trigger chemistry dictates the timing and location of carrier cargo release, but the physical architecture of the carrier determines how much drug can be loaded, how the carrier is cleared from the body, and how readily it can be functionalized with targeting ligands. The following platforms are common in the literature reviewed above.

5.1 Liposomes

First described by Bangham and colleagues in the 1960s, liposomes are spherical vesicles composed of one or more phospholipid bilayers surrounding an aqueous core. Their amphiphilic architecture allows simultaneous encapsulation of hydrophilic drugs within the aqueous compartment and hydrophobic drugs within the bilayer, and their phospholipid composition confers excellent biocompatibility.[2] Liposomes were the first nanocarrier platform to be made stimuli-responsive, beginning with thermosensitive formulations in the 1970s, and have since been adapted to pH-, redox-, and photo-responsive designs, including the folate-targeted, catalase-conjugated, ROS-responsive liposome used to deliver methotrexate in rheumatoid arthritis.[30] Their principal drawbacks are relatively modest drug loading capacity and limited long-term storage stability, both of which have motivated the search for alternative platforms.[2]

5.2 Polymeric Micelles and Nanoparticles

Polymeric nanocarriers, first proposed as drug delivery vehicles in the mid-1970s, are now the most versatile and widely used platform in stimuli-responsive research.[2] Amphiphilic block copolymers self-assemble in aqueous media into core-shell micelles, with a hydrophobic core available for drug loading and a hydrophilic corona-commonly poly (ethylene glycol) that prolongs systemic circulation by reducing recognition by the mononuclear phagocyte system.[4] Because the chemistry of the core-forming and shell-forming blocks can be tailored almost without limit, polymeric micelles have been engineered to respond to essentially every stimulus discussed in this review, and their degradation products can often be designed to be non-toxic (e.g., poly (lactic-co-glycolic acid), PLGA). Solid polymeric nanoparticles, distinguished from micelles by a dense rather than a swollen core, offer higher loading capacity and more prolonged release but present fewer terminal functional groups for surface modification, somewhat limiting their targeting versatility.[1,35]

5.3 Dendrimers

Dendrimers are highly branched, monodisperse macromolecules that radiate from a central core through iterative generations of branching, terminating in a dense shell of surface functional groups. This architecture provides an unusually high density of sites for drug conjugation or ligand attachment per particle, and dendrimer generation can be tuned precisely to control overall particle size.[3] Poly(amidoamine) (PAMAM) dendrimers linked to poly (ethylene glycol) through a redox-cleavable disulfide bond have been used to build dual pH- and redox-responsive carriers for doxorubicin, in which drug release accelerates as the degree of PEGylation and, therefore, the degree of protection during circulation is varied.[24]

5.4 Hydrogels and Nanogels

Hydrogels are three-dimensional, crosslinked polymer networks capable of absorbing and retaining large quantities of water-often exceeding 99% of their total mass-while maintaining structural integrity.[3] Because the degree of swelling and the density of the crosslinked network can be made sensitive to pH, temperature, or enzymatic degradation, hydrogels are particularly well suited to intra-articular depot applications, where a single injection must sustain drug release over an extended period. The nanoparticle-hydrogel hybrid loaded with triamcinolone acetonide and rendered MMP-responsive through triglycerol monostearate chemistry exemplifies this approach, having been explicitly designed as an "arthritis flare-responsive" depot that releases more drug during periods of active inflammation and less during quiescence.[7] Nanogels-hydrogel particles at the sub-micron scale-combine the swelling behaviour of bulk hydrogels with the pharmacokinetic advantages of nanoscale carriers and have found particular application in thermoresponsive and neurological drug delivery.[3]

5.5 Gold and Other Inorganic Nanocarriers

Gold nanoparticles, nanorods, nanoshells, and half-shells possess a localized surface plasmon resonance that allows them to convert absorbed near-infrared light efficiently into heat, forming the physical basis of photothermal therapy. Beyond their optical properties, gold nanostructures are comparatively easy to synthesize and conjugate to multiple bioactive agents simultaneously and can be tuned in size and shape to optimize pharmacokinetics and biodistribution.[2] Superparamagnetic iron oxide nanoparticles represent a second important inorganic platform, valued for magnetic resonance imaging contrast, magnetically guided targeting, and magnetic hyperthermia.[1] Metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), coordination polymers built from metal ions and organic linkers, offer exceptionally high porosity and drug loading capacity together with intrinsic pH- and enzyme-responsive degradation and have been used to build cartilage-targeted, hyaluronic-acid-functionalized carriers for osteoarthritis therapy.[9,39]

5.6 Quantum Dots

Quantum dots are nanoscale semiconductor crystals, typically composed of elements from groups II–VI or III–V of the periodic table, whose optical, electrical, and photoluminescent properties make them attractive for combined imaging and drug delivery ("theranostic") applications.[2] Their principal advantages are highly tunable fluorescence emission and straightforward real-time tracking of carrier biodistribution; their principal limitation, particularly for applications requiring transit across the blood–brain barrier, is incompletely characterized long-term toxicity, which continues to constrain their clinical development.[3]

6. BIOMEDICAL APPLICATIONS

6.1 Cancer Therapy

Oncology remains the field in which stimuli-responsive nanocarriers are most mature, reflecting both the severity of unmet clinical need and the pronounced, well-characterized biochemical differences between tumor and normal tissue—including acidic extracellular pH, elevated intracellular glutathione, mild hyperthermia, and overexpression of specific proteases.[3,4] pH-responsive systems remain the most frequently investigated class in cancer nanomedicine, closely followed by temperature-responsive systems, and both have been combined with active targeting ligands (folate, RGD peptides, and transferrin) to further improve tumor selectivity beyond passive accumulation via the enhanced permeability and retention effect.[3] The ultimate goal, as defined in this literature, of a nanomedicine that can eradicate malignant tissue without systemic toxicity has yet to be fully achieved, but gradual improvements in tumor selectivity and reductions in off-target drug exposure have been consistently reported across pH, redox, enzyme, thermo, and photo-responsive platforms.[3,19]

6.2 Inflammatory Arthritis

Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis together are a major cause of disability due to a self-amplifying cycle of cartilage degeneration, synovial inflammation and hyperplasia, and subchondral bone remodelling [1]. Each of these pathological compartments has a distinct, exploitable biochemical signature: chondrocytes exposed to abnormal mechanical loading and inflammatory cytokines upregulate degradative MMPs and produce excess ROS; macrophages and fibroblast-like synoviocytes infiltrate the synovium and release increasing amounts of MMPs, cathepsins, and pro-inflammatory cytokines in a more acidic extracellular matrix; meanwhile, subchondral osteoclasts create a very acidic resorption microenvironment as they degrade the underlying bone.[1,35] This anatomical and biochemical heterogeneity has motivated the design of enzyme, redox, and pH-responsive carriers specifically targeted to each compartment. Several of these enzyme-, redox-, and pH-responsive carriers are the MMP-responsive TG-18 hydrogel, the ROS-responsive gas-generating hollow microsphere, and the osteoclast-acidification-responsive bisphosphonated nanocellulose composite.[1,7,8,15]

Outside of single stimulus designs, dual-targeted systems have shown particular promise in the case of arthritis, where the responsive mechanism and cellular target must be optimized in concert. An RGD-modified, MMP-9-responsive PLGA nanoparticle loaded with the natural product tripterine was designed to bind β3 integrin on both subchondral osteoclasts and synovial macrophages, leading to apoptosis in the two cell populations upon local MMP-9-triggered drug release. In a rat model of adjuvant arthritis, this dual-cell, enzyme-responsive approach reduced osteoclast numbers, suppressed macrophage-driven inflammation, and provided measurable repair from bone erosion.[16] However, a recent survey of the arthritis literature identified a number of challenges unique to joint disease that remain unresolved, including the complex physiologic and anatomic barriers posed by dense, avascular cartilage matrix; the immunogenicity and pharmacokinetics of repeated intra-articular injection; poor patient compliance with injectable regimens; and a continuing lack of validated animal models that fully recapitulate human disease.[20]

6.3 Gene Therapy

Gene therapy-the direct modification, silencing, or replacement of disease-associated genetic material-depends on delivery vehicles capable of protecting fragile nucleic acids from nuclease degradation, promoting cellular uptake, and releasing their cargo intracellularly at the correct subcellular location.[3] Stimuli-responsive nanocarriers are particularly well suited to this task because they can be designed to remain condensed and protective during extracellular transit and to decondense only after reaching the reducing, mildly acidic environment of the cytosol or nucleus. Redox-responsive systems, exploiting the same GSH gradient, are considered among the most effective strategies for both gene delivery and stimulus-responsive cancer therapy, since disulfide-crosslinked polyplexes can be engineered to disassemble specifically upon cytosolic entry, releasing intact plasmid DNA or siRNA for subsequent transcription or gene silencing.[2]

6.4 Neurological Disease

Traumatic brain injury, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, glioblastoma, and related neurological disorders present a distinctive delivery challenge because the blood–brain barrier excludes the majority of systemically administered therapeutics.[2] Stimuli-responsive hydrogels, owing to their three-dimensional, highly porous, cross-linked architecture, have been proposed as scaffolds capable of either traversing or bypassing the blood–brain barrier and supporting the delivery of cells or growth factors for tissue repair; their biocompatibility profile is generally regarded as superior to that of purely synthetic inorganic nanomaterials, mitigating one of the principal toxicity concerns associated with quantum dots and metallic nanostructures used.[2] Photo- and magnetically responsive nanoparticles have additionally been investigated for glioma therapy, where near-infrared or magnetic triggering allows drug release to be confined to the resection cavity or tumor margin, reducing exposure of adjacent healthy neural tissue, as illustrated by the NIR-responsive gold nanorod system for glioblastoma.[26]

7. MULTI-STIMULI AND DUAL-TARGETED RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

No single endogenous or exogenous signal is perfectly specific to diseased tissue: pH, ROS, and enzyme activity all fluctuate to some degree in healthy tissue and subcellular compartments, so relying on a single trigger risks both incomplete release at the target site and a background rate of "false positive" release elsewhere. Multi-stimuli-responsive carriers address this limitation by requiring two or more independent signals to coincide before releasing their payload, thereby narrowing the anatomical and temporal window in which drug release occurs and improving the overall precision of the system.[1,34]

Several combinations have been explored. A cartilage-targeting ferritin nanocage engineered to respond to both MMP-13 and pH functions simultaneously as an imaging probe, "turning on" its fluorescence signal, and as a drug delivery vehicle, releasing an anti-inflammatory payload only when both elevated MMP-13 activity and reduced pH are present in the osteoarthritic joint cavity—an integration of diagnosis and therapy sometimes termed "theranostics". Photothermally controlled methotrexate release from gold-shell nanoparticles targeting rheumatoid fibroblast-like synoviocytes similarly layers a light-based trigger onto an enzyme- or receptor-mediated targeting mechanism.[1] In oncology, pH/redox dual-responsive PAMAM-PEG dendrimer conjugates and temperature/light/redox triple-responsive graft copolymers have both been reported, illustrating that as many as three independent triggers can, in principle, be incorporated into a single carrier, at the cost of considerably greater synthetic complexity.[24] Because magnetic- and ultrasound-responsive materials share an intrinsic capacity to generate local heat, and because pH- and ultrasound-responsive materials can both enhance cellular uptake, some combinations offer synergistic rather than merely additive benefits, a design principle that is likely to guide the next generation of responsive carriers.[1,35]

8. CHALLENGES AND TRANSLATIONAL BARRIERS

Despite two decades of active investigation, only a small number of stimuli-responsive nanomedicines—most notably thermosensitive liposomal formulations such as ThermoDox-have progressed to clinical evaluation, and the vast majority of the systems described in this review remain confined to in vitro or small-animal proof-of-concept studies. Several recurring obstacles help explain this translational gap.[1,34,35]

First, disease-specific anatomical barriers can prohibit a well-designed responsive carrier from reaching its intended target in sufficient quantity; for example, the dense, avascular, and negatively charged extracellular matrix of articular cartilage can substantially impede nanoparticle penetration regardless of how precisely the carrier responds to local pH or enzyme activity. Second, most data in vivo are derived from animal models whose physiology, joint biomechanics, and immune responses differ meaningfully from those of humans, complicating extrapolation of efficacy and safety findings to clinical populations. Third, the systemic and local toxicity of many nanocarrier materials is incompletely characterized; nanoparticles can trigger hypersensitivity reactions, disrupt cytoskeletal organization, or themselves promote excess ROS production, but not all published studies have routinely evaluated the toxicity of the unloaded ("empty") carrier, leaving important safety gaps that may only surface during later-stage preclinical testing. Fourth, the most elaborate multi-component, multi-stimuli architectures that provide the greatest theoretical precision are often the most difficult to manufacture reproducibly at scale, favoring simpler formulations for eventual clinical translation even where they sacrifice some targeting sophistication. Finally, there are not yet standardized, harmonized criteria for assessing and reporting the toxicity, stability, and release kinetics of nanocarrier materials, making it difficult to compare results across laboratories or to develop the kind of cumulative evidence base that regulatory approval usually requires.[1]

9. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

A number of research directions appear set to fill the gap between laboratory prototype and clinical product. Further refinement of naturally derived carrier materials such as platelet-derived extracellular vesicles, exosomes, and other cell-derived nanostructures may provide a path towards improved biocompatibility and reduced immunogenicity relative to entirely synthetic polymers and inorganic nanoparticles, as these materials are derived from the cellular machinery of the body itself. More structurally complex multi-stimuli carriers are likely to require advances in scalable, reproducible manufacturing techniques, such as microfluidic mixing, non-wetting template molding, and coaxial turbulent jet mixing, before moving beyond bench-scale synthesis. Greater emphasis on multi-target, multi-compartment designs—carriers that can simultaneously address cartilage, synovial, and subchondral bone pathology within a single injection, for example—could substantially improve outcomes in diseases such as inflammatory arthritis that involve several anatomically distinct but mechanistically interconnected tissue compartments. Finally, greater collaboration between materials chemists, particle toxicologists, and clinical investigators, as well as harmonized standards for preclinical evaluation, will be critical to develop the type of robust, comparable evidence base needed to support regulatory review and, ultimately, routine clinical use.[1,34,35]

10. CONCLUSION

Stimuli-responsive nanocarriers are a conceptually elegant and increasingly well-validated strategy for enhancing the precision, efficacy, and safety of drug delivery across a wide spectrum of diseases. Molecular switches responsive to pH, redox potential, specific enzymes, temperature, light, ultrasound, or magnetic fields have been conjugated to nanoscale carriers, and this strategy has proven effective in confining drug release to diseased tissue with a level of spatial and temporal control not achievable with conventional formulations. The data reviewed here, mainly from oncology and inflammatory arthritis but increasingly from gene therapy and neurological disease, demonstrate consistent improvements in local drug concentration, reduction in systemic exposure, and, in many preclinical models, improved therapeutic efficacy relative to free drug or nonresponsive nanocarrier controls. Anatomical barriers, incomplete toxicological characterization, manufacturing complexity, and the lack of standardized evaluation criteria, however, continue to impede the translational pathway from bench to bedside. Better materials, more predictive preclinical models, and closer interdisciplinary collaboration will be critical to overcoming these barriers if the substantial promise of stimuli-responsive nanomedicine is to be realized in routine clinical practice.

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