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NEXT-GENERATION THERAPIES FOR CML: HARNESSING SCIENCE TO OVERCOME RESISTANCE

KULKARNI D[1], BHUJANGE D[*2], SNEHLATA[3] AND SUNDER BS[4]

1: Department of Pharmaceutical Quality Assurance, ASPM's K. T. Patil College of Pharmacy, Dharashiv Maharashtra Pin code - 413501, India

2: Department of Pharmaceutics, Shivai Charitable Trust college of Pharmacy, Koregaonwadi Maharashtra, India. - 413606

3: Department of pharmaceutics, Basaveshwara institute of pharmaceutical sciences Humnabad, Karnataka Pin code – 585330, India

4: Department of Pharmacology, HKES's Matoshree Taradevi Rampure Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences. Gulberga, Karnataka, India

***Corresponding Author: Ms. Dhanashri Tatyarao Bhujange: E Mail:** Dhanashree1491@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) is a hematological malignancy distinguished by the presence of the BCR-ABL1 fusion gene, resulting from the Philadelphia chromosome translocation. This fusion leads to constitutive tyrosine kinase activity, driving unregulated cell proliferation and survival. Tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) have revolutionized CML management by specifically targeting the BCR-ABL1 protein, altering the natural history of the disease and providing near-normal life expectancy for many patients.

Imatinib, the first-generation TKI, set the foundation for targeted therapy in CML, demonstrating remarkable efficacy in achieving hematologic, cytogenetic, and molecular responses. Despite its success, resistance and suboptimal responses prompted the development of second-generation TKIs like Dasatinib and Nilotinib. These agents, with enhanced potency and ability to target resistant BCR-ABL1 mutations, including some imatinib-resistant cases, have further improved therapeutic outcomes.

Pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of TKIs highlight their ability to penetrate hematopoietic cells and maintain effective intracellular concentrations, while safety profiles emphasize the need to balance efficacy with manageable adverse effects. Common adverse events include cytopenias, cardiovascular toxicities, and metabolic disturbances, varying among TKIs.

Emerging strategies focus on overcoming resistance due to mutations, such as T315I, through third-generation TKIs like Ponatinib and allosteric inhibitors like Asciminib. Advances in combination therapies, gene editing technologies, and immunotherapeutic approaches offer promising avenues. Future research aims at achieving treatment-free remission and personalized medicine, optimizing therapies to individual patient profiles. These next-generation approaches are poised to further redefine the treatment paradigm of CML, addressing resistance and unmet clinical needs.

Keywords: CML, TKIs, Imatinib, Dasatinib, Nilotinib, Drug Resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) constitutes 15–20% of leukemias in adults, with an annual incidence of 1–2 cases per 100,000 individuals globally **[1, 2]**. The disease is driven by a t(9;22)(q34;q11) chromosomal translocation, which creates the Philadelphia chromosome, resulting in the formation of the BCR-ABL1 fusion oncogene **[3]**. This oncogene encodes a constitutively active tyrosine kinase, promoting uncontrolled proliferation of hematopoietic stem cells while inhibiting apoptosis **[4]**.

Prior to the introduction of targeted therapies, treatment options for CML included interferon-alpha and bone marrow transplantation, both associated with significant limitations. The development of tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs), starting with Imatinib, marked a paradigm shift, rendering CML a manageable chronic condition for most patients **[5, 6]**.

Second-generation TKIs, Dasatinib and Nilotinib, were developed to address resistance and intolerance issues associated with Imatinib **[7, 8]**. Their higher potency and efficacy against specific BCR-ABL1 mutations have expanded treatment options, improving outcomes even in advanced disease stages **[9, 10]**.

This article provides a detailed analysis of the pharmacological properties, clinical outcomes, and comparative advantages of Imatinib, Dasatinib, and Nilotinib, emphasizing their roles in personalized medicine and the ongoing efforts to overcome treatment resistance.

1.1 Pathophysiology and Drug Mechanism of Action

Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) arises from a clonal expansion of hematopoietic stem cells harboring the Philadelphia chromosome, a reciprocal translocation between the long arms of chromosomes 9 and 22, denoted as t(9;22)(q34;q11) **[11, 12]**. The BCR-ABL1 fusion gene, which encodes a constitutively active tyrosine kinase, is produced via this translocation **[13]**.

The aberrant tyrosine kinase activity leads to:

Increased Cellular Proliferation: The BCR-ABL1 protein stimulates uncontrolled cell division via activation of the Ras/MAPK and PI3K/AKT pathways **[14, 15]**.

Inhibition of Apoptosis: Anti-apoptotic signaling through STAT5 and upregulation of Bcl-xL prevents programmed cell death **[16]**.

Genomic Instability: Abnormal kinase activity promotes mutations and chromosomal aberrations **[17]**.

1.1.1 Stages of CML Progress:

- **Chronic Phase (CP):** Characterized by mild symptoms and leukocytosis.
- **Accelerated Phase (AP):** Increasing blast count and loss of hematopoietic control.
- **Blast Crisis (BC):** Transformation to acute leukemia, with a poor prognosis **[18, 19]**.

1.1.2 Initial Signs and Symptoms

The clinical presentation of CML is often nonspecific, particularly in the chronic phase. Common symptoms include:

- **Fatigue**: Resulting from anemia and increased metabolic demand **[20]**.
- **Weight Loss and Night Sweats**: Likely due to hypermetabolism **[21]**.
- **Splenomegaly**: Causes left upper quadrant pain or fullness; seen in 50–70% of cases **[22, 23]**.
- **Leukocytosis-Related Symptoms**: Including easy bruising, infections, and rarely leukostasis (headaches, blurred vision, priapism) **[24, 25]**.

1.2 Mechanism of Action of Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitors (TKIs)

1.2.1 **Imatinib**:

Action: Selectively inhibits the ATP-binding site of the BCR-ABL1 kinase, blocking phosphorylation of downstream substrates **[26]**.

Outcome: Prevents proliferation and induces apoptosis in leukemic cells.

1.2.2 **Dasatinib**:

Action: Attaches itself to BCR-ABL1 kinase's active and inactive conformations. Additionally inhibits SRC family kinases, which play a role in resistance **[27, 28]**.

Outcome: Effective in Imatinib-resistant cases (except T315I mutation).

1.2.3 **Nilotinib**:

Action: Targets the inactive conformation of BCR-ABL1 with higher specificity and potency than Imatinib **[29]**.

Outcome: Reduced off-target effects but requires strict adherence to dosing schedules due to food interaction risks **[30]**.

1.3 Pharmacology of Imatinib, Dasatinib, and Nilotinib

1.3.1 Imatinib

Pharmacokinetics:

- **Absorption**: Imatinib is well absorbed orally, with a bioavailability of 98% **[31, 32]**.
- **Metabolism**: Primarily metabolized by the liver through the cytochrome P450 enzyme CYP3A4, producing an active metabolite (N-desmethyl imatinib) **[33]**.
- **Elimination**: Excreted predominantly in feces (68%) and urine (13%) **[34]**.
- **Half-Life**: 18 hours for the parent drug and 40 hours for its active metabolite, allowing once-daily dosing **[35]**.

Pharmacodynamics:

Imatinib binds specifically to the ATP-binding site of the BCR-ABL1 tyrosine kinase, preventing substrate phosphorylation and downstream signaling. This selective inhibition halts leukemic cell proliferation and induces apoptosis **[36]**.

Adverse Effects:

- **Common**: Edema, nausea, fatigue, and muscle cramps **[37]**.
- **Severe**: Hepatotoxicity, cardiotoxicity (e.g., congestive heart failure), and rare myelosuppression **[38, 39]**.

1.3.2 Dasatinib

Pharmacokinetics:

- **Absorption**: Rapid oral absorption, with a bioavailability of ~14–34% due to first-pass metabolism **[40, 41]**.
- **Metabolism**: Metabolized by CYP3A4, forming inactive metabolites **[42]**.
- **Elimination**: Primarily through feces (85%), with minimal renal excretion **[43]**.
- **Half-Life**: 3–5 hours, requiring once- or twice-daily dosing **[44]**.

Pharmacodynamics:

Dasatinib targets both active and inactive conformations of the BCR-ABL1 kinase. Additionally, it inhibits SRC family kinases, contributing to its potency in resistant case **[45]**.

Adverse Effects:

- **Common**: Diarrhea, headache, and fluid retention (e.g., pleural effusion) **[46]**.
- **Severe**: Cytopenias (e.g., thrombocytopenia), QT

prolongation, and pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) **[47, 48]**.

1.3.3 Nilotinib

Pharmacokinetics:

- **Absorption**: Oral bioavailability is ~30%, influenced significantly by food intake **[49]**.
- **Metabolism**: Extensively metabolized by CYP3A4. Grapefruit juice and other CYP3A4 inhibitors can increase serum levels, posing toxicity risks **[50]**.
- **Elimination**: Primarily excreted via feces (90%) **[51]**.
- **Half-Life**: 17 hours, enabling twice-daily dosing **[52]**.

Pharmacodynamics:

Nilotinib has a higher binding affinity for the inactive conformation of BCR-ABL1 than Imatinib. This specificity increases its potency against resistant mutations (excluding T315I) **[53]**.

Adverse Effects:

- **Common**: Rash, pruritus, and gastrointestinal disturbances **[54]**.
- **Severe**: QT prolongation, hyperglycemia, and hepatotoxicity, necessitating regular monitoring **[55]**.

1.3.4 Comparative study of Features of Drugs

Feature	Imatinib	Dasatinib	Nilotinib
Generation	First	Second	Second
Dose	400 mg OD	100 mg OD	300 mg BID
Half-Life	~18 hours	~3–5 hours	~17 hours
Mutation Coverage	Limited	Broad (not T315I)	Broad (not T315I)
Adverse Effects	Edema, fatigue	Pleural effusion, QT prolongation	QT prolongation, metabolic issues

2. CLINICAL TRIAL EVIDENCE FOR TKIS IN CML

Clinical trials have been instrumental in evaluating the safety, efficacy, and long-term outcomes of tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) in the management of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML). The pivotal studies **IRIS**, **DASISION**, and **ENESTnd** have shaped the current treatment paradigm.

2.1 IRIS Trial: Imatinib as First-Line Therapy

The **International Randomized Study of Interferon and STI571 (IRIS)** trial was the ground breaking study that established **imatinib** as the standard of care for newly diagnosed chronic-phase CML.

- **Design and Population**: This phase III trial compared **imatinib (400 mg daily)** with a combination of interferon-alpha and cytarabine in over 1,100 patients **[56, 57]**.
- **Primary Endpoint**: Major cytogenetic response (MCyR) rate.
- **Results**:
  - At 18 months, 76% of imatinib-treated patients

achieved MCyR, compared to 14% in the control group **[58]**.

- Long-term data showed an **8-year overall survival (OS) rate of 85%** for imatinib **[59]**.

- **Implications**: Revolutionized the treatment landscape by significantly improving survival and tolerability compared to traditional therapies.

2.2 DASISION Trial: Dasatinib for Newly Diagnosed Patients

The **DASISION** trial (Dasatinib versus Imatinib Study In Treatment-Naïve CML Patients) compared dasatinib with imatinib as first-line therapy for newly diagnosed chronic-phase CML.

- **Design and Population**: Phase III study enrolling 519 patients randomized to dasatinib (100 mg once daily) or imatinib (400 mg once daily) **[60]**
- **Primary Endpoint**: Rate of confirmed complete cytogenetic response (CCyR) at 12 months.
- **Results**:
  - Dasatinib achieved a **CCyR rate of 77% versus 66% for imatinib**.
  - Major molecular response (MMR) was significantly higher with dasatinib at 46% compared to 28% **[61]**.
- **Adverse Events**: Dasatinib showed a higher incidence of pleural effusion but lower rates of edema than imatinib **[62]**.
- **Implications**: Dasatinib was shown to be more potent, with faster and deeper molecular responses.

2.3 ENESTnd Trial: Nilotinib for Newly Diagnosed Patients

The **ENESTnd** (Evaluating Nilotinib Efficacy and Safety in Clinical Trials—Newly Diagnosed Patients) trial assessed nilotinib as a first-line therapy for CML.

- **Design and Population**: Phase III trial involving 846 patients randomized to nilotinib (300 mg or 400 mg twice daily) or imatinib (400 mg daily) **[63]**.
- **Primary Endpoint**: Rate of MMR at 12 months.
- **Results**:
  - Nilotinib achieved MMR rates of **44% (300 mg BID)** and **43% (400 mg BID)**, compared to 22% with imatinib **[64]**.
  - Faster time to molecular response with nilotinib compared to imatinib.
- **Adverse Events**: Increased risk of metabolic effects, including hyperglycemia and QT prolongation, compared to imatinib **[65]**.
- **Implications**: Established nilotinib as a preferred option for patients with resistance or intolerance to imatinib.

2.4 Comparative Outcomes from Clinical Trials

Parameter	Imatinib (IRIS)	Dasatinib (DASISION)	Nilotinib (ENESTnd)
Cytogenetic Response	76% (MCyR)	77% (CCyR)	N/A
Molecular Response (MMR)	~40% (long-term)	46% at 12 months	44% at 12 months
Survival (OS)	85% (8 years)	Not reported (but favorable)	Not reported
Adverse Effects	Edema, fatigue	Pleural effusion, cytopenias	QT prolongation, hyperglycemia

3. RESISTANCE MECHANISMS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES IN CML TREATMENT

While tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) have significantly transformed the treatment landscape of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML), the emergence of resistance remains a critical challenge, especially in advanced disease stages. Resistance mechanisms, such as the T315I mutation, highlight the need for ongoing therapeutic innovation. This section discusses key resistance mechanisms, the role of next-generation therapies, and future directions in CML management.

Resistance Mechanisms

3.1 BCR-ABL1 Mutations

3.1.1 **Point Mutations**: Mutations within the BCR-ABL1 kinase domain are the most common cause of TKI resistance. These mutations disrupt TKI binding and impair drug efficacy **[66, 67]**.

3.1.2 Overexpression of BCR-ABL1: Amplification of the BCR-ABL1 gene can lead to increased levels of the tyrosine kinase, overwhelming the inhibitory capacity of TKIs **[70]**.

3.2 T315I Mutation:

It is Known as the "gatekeeper" mutation, T315I involves the substitution of isoleucine for threonine at position 315, leading to steric hindrance that prevents binding of first- and second-generation TKIs **[68]**. T315I confers high resistance to imatinib, dasatinib, and nilotinib **[69]**.

3.3 Drug Efflux and Pharmacokinetics

Overexpression of efflux transporters like **P-glycoprotein (P-gp)** reduces intracellular TKI concentrations **[71]**.

3.4 Alternative Signaling Pathways

Activation of bypass signaling pathways, such as **SRC family kinases**, can sustain leukemic cell survival despite TKI inhibition **[72]**.

4. NEXT-GENERATION THERAPIES

4.1 Ponatinib

4.1.1 **Mechanism of Action**:

A third-generation TKI, ponatinib is effective against all known BCR-ABL1 mutations, including T315I **[73]**.

It inhibits the kinase by binding irreversibly to both active and inactive conformations **[74]**.

4.1.2 **Clinical Evidence**:

The **PACE trial** demonstrated that 56% of chronic-phase CML patients harboring T315I achieved a major cytogenetic response (MCyR) with ponatinib **[75]**.

4.1.3 **Adverse Effects**:

Increased risk of arterial occlusive events requires careful patient selection and monitoring **[76]**.

4.2 Asciminib

4.2.1. **Mechanism of Action**: Unlike ATP-competitive TKIs, asciminib is a new STAMP inhibitor (specifically targeting the ABL Myristoyl Pocket) **[77]**. It works by allosterically inhibiting BCR-ABL1 kinase activity **[78]**.

4.2.2 Clinical Evidence:

The **ASCEMBL trial** showed superior efficacy of asciminib compared to bosutinib in patients resistant to multiple TKIs **[79]**.

4.2.3 Advantages:

Minimal off-target effects and a distinct mechanism make asciminib a promising option for resistant cases **[80]**.

4.3 Other Investigational Agents

Ongoing Research: Compounds like HQP1351 and PF-114 are under clinical evaluation for their activity against T315I and other resistant clones **[81, 82]**.

5. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

5.1 Combination Therapies

- Synergistic combinations of TKIs with agents targeting immune checkpoints, apoptosis regulators, or epigenetic modifiers are being investigated **[83]**.
- Examples include TKIs combined with **BCL-2 inhibitors** or **PD-1/PD-L1 checkpoint inhibitors**.

5.2 Immunotherapy and CAR-T Cells

Chimeric Antigen Receptor T-cell (CAR-T) therapies targeting BCR-ABL1 or leukemia-associated antigens represent a novel approach **[84]**.

5.3 Treatment-Free Remission (TFR)

Studies are focusing on achieving deep molecular responses to enable patients to discontinue therapy without disease relapse **[85, 86]**.

5.4 Resistance Prevention Strategies

Improved detection of minimal residual disease (MRD) using next-generation sequencing (NGS) could enable early identification and management of resistance **[87]**.

6. CONCLUSION:

These important studies showed how well TKIs work to produce deep molecular responses, increase survival, and enhance quality of life in patients with CML. While second-generation TKIs like dasatinib and nilotinib provide alternatives for quicker reactions or cases of resistance, imatinib is still a fundamental treatment.

T315I mutations and next-generation treatments like ponatinib and asciminib will be examined in the part that follows, which will focus on resistance mechanisms and future perspectives.

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