

RSC Drug Discovery

Human-based Systems for Translational Research

Edited by Robert Coleman



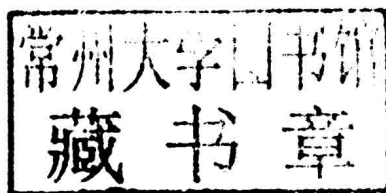
Human-based Systems for Translational Research

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Preface

Experimental animals have been a mainstay in the discovery and development of new medicines for human diseases for over half a century, so why do we now need to consider the use of humanised systems?

Historically, the pharmaceutical industry has been hugely successful, bringing a wide range of powerful and effective medicines to the market. Medicines to treat a wide range of disorders for which there had previously been, at best, inadequate treatment have been discovered and added to the clinician's armamentarium. It seemed that nothing could stop the almost exponential increase in the pharmaceutical industry's output. However, the last two to three decades have seen a marked decline in the productivity of this once prolific industry,^{1,2} the effects of which have been stark, leading to a complete restructuring of the sector. Unfortunately, however dramatic such restructuring has been, it has not resulted in the hoped for increases in output of new safe and effective medicines per unit investment.³ Increasingly, when potential medicines developed using animal models are tested in human subjects, they are being found to fail for reasons of either lack of efficacy or associated use-limiting side effects and frank toxicity.

While lack of efficacy is of course a real problem, even more serious is the capacity of new medicines to do harm. In the early part of the 20th century, human medicines could be introduced onto the market with no legal requirement for the manufacturer to explore and report their safety profiles, but this changed following the Elixir sulfanilamide scandal. In 1937, a novel preparation of the antibacterial drug, sulfanilamide, was introduced to the US market, and was responsible for in excess of 100 fatalities.⁴ This led to Congress passing the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, requiring companies to present safety data obtained in experimental animals on any proposed new drug, and to submit the data for approval by the FDA before

being allowed to proceed to market. And so the use of animals to identify potential human hazards became routine within the pharmaceutical industry. The idea of using animals as human surrogates was based on the physiological parallels between humans and other animals, particularly those most closely related in evolutionary terms, *i.e.* mammalian species. While this was a clearly rational approach, it did not totally resolve the issue, and this was most clearly demonstrated in the 1950s with the thalidomide disaster.⁵ Thalidomide had been introduced as a mild sedative, particularly useful in reducing morning sickness in pregnancy, but was subsequently identified as the causative agent in the sudden explosion of cases of serious birth defects in the offspring of women who had been prescribed the drug. It is not that thalidomide had not been tested for side effects in experimental animals, it was simply the case that none had been performed on pregnant females to assess effects of the drug on the offspring, and interestingly, even if it had, because of species differences in this effect, the problem would probably not have been picked up. However, it was the thalidomide affair that consolidated the need for the rigorous safety evaluation of new potential medicines, and led to the increased use of animals as patient substitutes that persists to the present day.

As first-line testing for safety issues in human patients or volunteers was and remains ethically unacceptable, the logic behind using experimental animals on the basis of overall physiological similarity was uncontroversial. However, as time has passed, it has become increasingly clear that non-human species do not always respond to drugs in the same way as the humans that they are meant to represent, and their ability to reflect both clinical efficacy and safety issues has been shown to be highly variable, depending on particular drug type and disease target. Despite this, there has been a general acceptance by the medical establishment, the pharmaceutical industry and the regulators that overall, despite their shortcomings, they are doing a fair job, and with the lack of any obvious alternative, we have continued to rely on the animal-based status quo to assure the public of the safety of new medicines. But in the light of ever-increasing numbers of high-profile failures, including, but by no means restricted to, phen-fen,⁶ various statins^{7,8} and COX2 inhibitors,^{9,10} this situation has become untenable, and it has become essential to do something to improve our ability to ensure the lack of safety problems with new medicines.

Much effort has been expended in exploring alternative approaches to new medicines R&D, and official organisations such as ECVAM (Europe) and ICCVAM (USA) have been established to determine their value. Unfortunately the output from these organisations is disappointingly low,¹¹ and relatively few alternatives have received the necessary level of validation required for regulatory authorities to accept these tests as viable contributors to preclinical safety testing. Furthermore, even in cases where tests have been approved for use in drug submissions, there remains the issue of persuading the pharmaceutical industry to abandon their established animal-based methods in favour of the validated alternative.

Although a rigorous validation process is applied to new technologies, it is a fact that few if any of the animal-based tests that form the basis of our current safety testing paradigm have themselves been subjected to such scrutiny; their value has been taken as a given, despite the wealth of evidence of their shortcomings. Indeed, if one looks for peer-reviewed publications providing support for the status quo, there is really only one, and that merely reports an overall modest (approximately 70%) concordance between toxicity seen in animal species and in human subjects.¹² In contrast, there is a wealth of publications providing data on the lack of value of animal data in identifying potential clinical safety issues.^{13–16} Indeed, a recent publication has explored the value of dogs as predictors of human safety profiles using more sophisticated measures of predictive power (likelihood ratios) than simple concordance, and have concluded that while demonstration of toxicity can in some cases reflect toxicity in humans (in line with Olson's findings), absence of toxicity in dogs provides no useful indication of absence in man.¹⁷

If testing in animals is an unreliable indicator of potential clinical safety issues, then why are they still demanded and relied upon? A comprehensive answer to this question is outside the scope of this volume, but one key factor is the widespread belief that while flawed, they are superior to whatever else is available.¹⁸ While there have long been proponents of a wider use of *in vitro* human systems, most moves in this direction have been rebuffed by claims that it is impossible to reflect the complexity of a whole integrated organism by looking at its parts in isolation, thus necessitating the use of animal surrogates. Such an attitude may be justified if there really are no viable alternatives available, *and* if the level of inaccuracy can be regarded as acceptable. For a long time, this attitude was (and in some quarters still is) the case, but technology moves on, and the seemingly impossible of yesterday becomes the possible of today, and the commonplace of tomorrow. With this in mind, together with the increasingly obvious inadequacies of the status quo, the exploration of human-based approaches seems unavoidable. Indeed, even the FDA, the primary regulatory authority in the USA, has come to this conclusion, stating on its website: "Consideration should be given to the use of appropriate *in vitro* alternative methods for safety evaluation. These methods, if accepted by all ICH regulatory authorities, can be used to replace current standard methods."¹⁹

It is fair to say that at this moment, we are not in a position to replace the current *in vivo* animal-based paradigm of assessing the potential safety and efficacy of new medicines with methods based on human *in vitro* models; there is much more work to do. However, we do now have greatly improved access to voluntarily donated viable human cells and tissues, an ever-increasing ability to generate a wide variety of tissue types from induced stem cells, and huge advances being made in a wide range of other technologies to apply to these materials, including those presented in this volume. With all this, we are now ready to perform proper evaluations of approaches which alone and in combination may offer superior means of establishing safety and efficacy of new medicines, consistent with 21st century science.

The purpose of this book therefore is not to present a list of established assays that can reliably identify the potential efficacies and safety issues associated with new medicines, but rather to illustrate what is currently possible in humanising medicines R&D, which with sufficient commitment of time, effort and imagination will provide a basis on which to establish more rational and reliable means of developing safe and effective drugs for the future than those on which we currently rely.

Robert Coleman

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Contents

Chapter 1 Access to Human Cells and Tissues	1
<i>Gerry Thomas</i>	
1.1 Ethics and Law Regarding Collection of Human Samples	1
1.1.1 The Four Cornerstones of Ethics and Biological Samples	1
1.1.2 Legal Issues	2
1.2 Practical Issues Regarding Human Tissue Collection and Annotation	8
1.2.1 Obtaining Tissue with Consent for Research	9
1.2.2 Accessing Material from a Diagnostic Archive	11
1.3 Improving Access and Annotation	12
1.3.1 Access Policies	12
1.3.2 Annotation	13
1.4 Summary	14
References	14
Chapter 2 Functional Studies with Human Isolated Tissues to Better Predict Clinical Safety and Efficacy	17
<i>David C. Bunton</i>	
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Sourcing, Storing and Transporting Human Fresh Tissues: The First Step is the Most Important	21

2.3 Common Experimental Approaches to Investigations in Isolated Fresh Human Tissues	23
2.3.1 Tissue Baths and Wire Myographs	23
2.3.2 Perfusion Myographs	25
2.3.3 Organoculture Systems and Precision-Cut Tissue Slices	25
2.3.4 Membrane Transport and Ussing Chambers: Skin, Lung Mucosa, Gastrointestinal Tract and Glandular Tissues	28
2.4 Applications of Functional Tissues in Drug Development: Safety, Efficacy and Personalised Medicines	29
2.4.1 Predicting Efficacy in Clinically Relevant Human Tissues	30
2.4.2 Predicting Safety and Toxicology Risks Using Functional Tissues	31
2.4.3 Functional Tissues and the Development of Personalised Medicines	32
2.5 Summary	35
Acknowledgements	35
References	35
Chapter 3 Translational Research in Pharmacology and Toxicology Using Precision-Cut Tissue Slices	38
<i>G. M. M. Groothuis, A. Casini, H. Meurs, and P. Olinga</i>	
3.1 Introduction	38
3.1.1 Precision-Cut Tissue Slices	38
3.1.2 Availability of Different Sources of Human Organs and Tissues	40
3.1.3 Techniques to Prepare and Incubate Precision-Cut Tissue Slices from Various Organs and Tissues	41
3.2 Human Precision-Cut Tissue Slices in ADME and Toxicology	43
3.3 Application of Human Precision-Cut Tissue Slices in Disease Models	47
3.3.1 Fibrosis in Liver and Intestine	47
3.3.2 Obstructive Lung Diseases	50
3.3.3 Cancer Research	54
3.3.4 Viral Infection Research	57
3.4 Concluding Remarks	58
References	58

Chapter 4	Modelling the Human Respiratory System: Approaches for <i>in Vitro</i> Safety Testing and Drug Discovery	66
	Human-Derived Lung Models; The Future of Toxicology Safety Assessment	
	<i>Zoë Prytherch and Kelly Bérubé</i>	
4.1	Introduction	66
4.1.1	Overview of the Respiratory System	66
4.1.2	Inhalation Toxicology	67
4.1.3	<i>Status Quo</i> in Safety Assessment	68
4.1.4	<i>In Vitro</i> Toxicology	68
4.1.5	Trends and Technology Uptake	69
4.2	Current Human-Based Models of the Respiratory System: An Overview	70
4.2.1	Cells and Tissues	70
4.2.2	General Culture Conditions	76
4.3	Discussion	80
	References	81
Chapter 5	Complex Primary Human Cell Systems for Drug Discovery	88
	<i>Ellen L. Berg and Alison O'Mahony</i>	
5.1	Introduction	88
5.1.1	Challenges of Target-Based Drug Discovery	88
5.1.2	Kinase Inhibitors – An Example Target Class	89
5.1.3	Complex Primary Human Cell Systems for Translational Biology	90
5.2	Case Studies – Anti-Inflammatory Kinase Inhibitors	95
5.2.1	JAK Kinase Inhibitors	95
5.2.2	SYK Kinase Inhibitors	101
5.3	Conclusions	105
	Acknowledgements	106
	References	106
Chapter 6	Human <i>in Vitro</i> ADMET and Prediction of Human Pharmacokinetics and Toxicity Liabilities at the Discovery Stage	110
	<i>Katya Tsaïoun</i>	
6.1	Introduction	110
6.2	The Science of ADMET	112
6.3	The ADMET Optimisation Loop	113
6.4	Impact of Early Human Pharmacokinetics Prediction	116

6.5	New Human ADMET Prediction Tools	117
6.5.1	The Blood-Brain Barrier Challenge	117
6.5.2	Mechanisms of Human Toxicity	121
6.5.3	The Power of Multiparametric Screening in Toxicology	125
6.6	Bridging the Gap between <i>in Vitro</i> and <i>in Vivo</i>	126
6.7	Conclusions and Future Directions	128
	References	129
Chapter 7	'Body-on-a-Chip' Technology and Supporting Microfluidics	132
	<i>A. S. T. Smith, C. J. Long, C. McAleer, X. Guo, M. Esch, J. M. Prot, M. L. Shuler, and J. J. Hickman</i>	
7.1	Introduction	132
7.2	Multi-Organ <i>in Vitro</i> Models	133
7.3	Functional Single-Organ <i>in Vitro</i> Models	136
7.3.1	Heart/Cardiac Tissue	137
7.3.2	Lung	137
7.3.3	Gastrointestinal (GI) Tract	139
7.3.4	Liver	141
7.3.5	Kidney	143
7.3.6	Adipose Tissue	143
7.3.7	Central Nervous System (CNS)/Peripheral Nervous System (PNS)	144
7.3.8	Skeletal Muscle	150
7.3.9	Blood Surrogate	150
7.4	Microfluidics	151
7.5	Concluding Remarks	153
	Acknowledgements	153
	References	153
Chapter 8	Utility of Human Stem Cells for Drug Discovery	162
	<i>Satyan Chintawar, Martin Graf, and Zameel Cader</i>	
8.1	Introduction	162
8.2	Existing Approaches to Drug Discovery	164
8.3	Advances in Human Stem Cell Technology	165
8.3.1	Embryonic Stem Cells	165
8.3.2	Reprogramming Somatic Cells	166
8.4	iPSC-Based Disease Models	167
8.4.1	iPSC-Based Neurological and Psychiatric Disease Models	167
8.4.2	iPSC-Based Cardiovascular Disease Models	169
8.4.3	Other Examples of iPSC-Based Disease Models	172
8.4.4	Genome Editing Tools	173

8.5	Use of iPSCs in Drug Efficacy Assessment	173
8.5.1	Target-Based Screening <i>versus</i> Phenotypic Screening	173
8.5.2	Examples of Drug Testing to Validate iPSC-Based Models	175
8.5.3	Drug Screens on iPSC-Based Models	176
8.6	Toxicity Testing Using iPSC-Based Models	177
8.6.1	Cardiotoxicity	177
8.6.2	Hepatotoxicity	178
8.6.3	Neurotoxicity	178
8.7	Integration of iPSCs in Drug Discovery	179
8.7.1	Challenges	179
8.7.2	Future Directions	180
8.8	Emerging Resources of Diseased iPS Cell Lines	181
8.8.1	StemBANCC (Stem Cells for Biological Assays of Novel Drugs and Predictive Toxicology)	181
8.8.2	EBiSC (European Bank for Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells)	182
8.8.3	HipSci (Human Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells Initiative)	183
8.9	Summary	183
	References	183
Chapter 9	<i>In Silico</i> Solutions for Predicting Efficacy and Toxicity	194
	<i>Glenn J. Myatt and Kevin P. Cross</i>	
9.1	Introduction	194
9.2	Representing Chemical Structures and Associated Data	196
9.2.1	Overview	196
9.2.2	Chemical Representation	196
9.2.3	Biological Data Representation	199
9.2.4	Calculated Data	199
9.3	Searching Chemical Databases	199
9.4	Calculating Molecular Fragment Descriptors	201
9.4.1	Overview of Fragment Types	201
9.4.2	Predefined Features	202
9.4.3	Structural Alerts	203
9.4.4	Common Chemical Scaffolds	204
9.4.5	Scaffolds Associated with Data	204
9.5	Understanding Structure–Activity or Toxicity Relationships	205
9.5.1	Overview	205
9.5.2	Classification Based on Substructures	205

9.5.3 Clustering	205
9.5.4 Decision Trees	207
9.6 Quantitative Structure–Activity Relationship (QSAR) Modelling	208
9.6.1 Overview	208
9.6.2 Building Models	208
9.6.3 Applying Models	210
9.6.4 Model Validation	211
9.6.5 Explaining the Results	211
9.7 Regulatory <i>in Silico</i> Case Study	212
9.8 Prediction of Human Adverse Events Case Study	215
9.9 Conclusions	216
References	217
Chapter 10 <i>In Silico</i> Organ Modelling in Predicting Efficacy and Safety of New Medicines	219
<i>Blanca Rodriguez</i>	
10.1 Introduction	219
10.2 State-of-the-Art Computational Cardiac Electrophysiology	220
10.2.1 Single Cardiomyocyte Models	220
10.2.2 Whole Organ Heart Models	223
10.2.3 Simulating Interactions of Medicines with Ionic Channels	226
10.3 Investigating Variability: Population of Models Approach	230
10.4 Validation of <i>in Silico</i> Models and Simulations	234
References	236
Chapter 11 Human Microdosing/Phase 0 Studies to Accelerate Drug Development	241
<i>R. Colin Garner</i>	
11.1 Introduction	241
11.2 What is Microdosing (Human Phase 0 Studies) and Where Does it Add Value?	243
11.3 Scientific, Regulatory and Ethical Aspects of Microdosing	244
11.3.1 Scientific Considerations	244
11.3.2 Regulatory	245
11.3.3 Ethical Considerations in Conducting Microdose Studies	247
11.4 Analytical Technologies used for Microdosing Studies	247
11.5 Applications of Microdosing	249