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Annual Review of Pharmacology and Toxicology
**Systems Pharmacology:
Defining the Interactions of
Drug Combinations**

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systems pharmacology, combination therapy, pharmacodynamics, systems biology, modeling, QSP, quantitative systems pharmacology

Abstract

The majority of diseases are associated with alterations in multiple molecular pathways and complex interactions at the cellular and organ levels. Single-target monotherapies therefore have intrinsic limitations with respect to their maximum therapeutic benefits. The potential of combination drug therapies has received interest for the treatment of many diseases and is well established in some areas, such as oncology. Combination drug treatments may allow us to identify synergistic drug effects, reduce adverse drug reactions, and address variability in disease characteristics between patients. Identification of combination therapies remains challenging. We discuss current state-of-the-art systems pharmacology approaches to enable rational identification of combination therapies. These approaches, which include characterization of mechanisms of disease and drug action at a systems level, can enable understanding of drug interactions at the molecular, cellular, physiological, and organismal levels. Such multiscale understanding can enable precision medicine by promoting the rational development of combination therapy at the level of individual patients for many diseases.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Complex diseases such as cancer, diabetes, infectious diseases, and cardiovascular diseases are associated with multiple alterations in molecular pathways and complex interactions at the cellular and organ levels (1). The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) studies, which provided detailed molecular characterization at the level of individual patients for many cancers (2–5), have shown that similar disease phenotypes can have differing underlying molecular networks (6, 7). This recognition of multiple molecular definitions for disease phenotypes gave rise to the idea of precision medicine, wherein diseases and treatments are guided by these molecular disease definitions in individual patients (8, 9).

When considering drug treatment strategies in complex diseases, single-target monotherapy approaches have fundamental limitations in terms of the optimal treatment effects that may be attainable, as disease phenotypes are rarely driven by single molecular entities; these limitations have led to an increasing interest in the development of combinatorial drug therapies (10–13). In oncology, the use of combination regimens is well established, and was so even long before the introduction of genomic technologies and insights into the molecular complexity of cancer (14). Yet for many other complex diseases, drug development is still primarily focused on monotherapeutic regimens, even though the molecular diversity of these diseases is often equally complex to that of cancer.

The discovery, translation, and clinical development of optimal combination drug regimens remains a major challenge in drug development (15, 16). Identification of drug combinations has been driven to a large extent by high-throughput phenotypic screens (17, 18). Although such assays are valuable, they have important limitations, including phenotypic readouts that oversimplify the complexity of disease phenotypes, in addition to practical limitations related to scalability in terms of the number of testable multidrug combinations or cell lines.

A holistic approach that considers both molecular interactions and multiscale physiological and pathophysiological mechanisms is relevant to the identification and evaluation of the effects of combinatorial drug regimens. Quantitative systems pharmacology (QSP), which combines systems biology analyses with the quantitative reasoning used in pharmacokinetic–pharmacodynamic (PK–PD) modeling, provides such a holistic approach (19–21). Systems pharmacology analyses focus on the quantitative relationships and interactions between drugs and biological systems, considering the behavior of the system as a whole rather than its individual constituents (22). Thus, systems pharmacology approaches can enable meaningful integration of the individual biological and pharmacological entities that are relevant for a pathophysiology of interest. Such integration can help us understand and predict systems-level effects of drug combination regimens.

Key challenges that could be addressed using systems pharmacology approaches include the consideration of variability of response between patients and, within patients (e.g., tumor heterogeneity), variability in terms of efficacy of drug therapy development or resistance to therapy and mitigation of drug-induced adverse events. This can be done by establishing multiscale relationships between drug action at the receptor and at the signal transduction level that describe the propagation of drug effects through cellular regulatory networks that give rise to the organ and organismal response to drug therapies.

New experimental technologies such as single-cell RNA-Seq (23), induced pluripotent stem cell–derived differentiated cells, organoids, and microfluidic microphysiological systems (MPSs) for drug testing (24–26) are of significant relevance to support systems pharmacology–guided combination therapy development. New computational methods that utilize machine learning and artificial intelligence approaches (27) are likely to have significant impact on systems pharmacology approaches in the coming years.

In this review, we discuss current and future approaches in systems pharmacology that can be used to enable rational identification of combination therapies, including repositioning of existing drugs (28) and development of personalized combination therapies.

2. RATIONALE FOR USING DRUG COMBINATIONS

Drug combination regimens may confer therapeutic benefits through different mechanisms. Drugs can interfere with disease-associated signal transduction pathways, either in serial, through different proteins in a single pathway, or in parallel, through proteins associated with different pathways (29), which can lead to synergistic drug effects (**Figure 1a**). Such synergy arises from cooperation between different pathways in producing physiological responses; this cooperation is often a complex feature in many cellular regulatory systems. Drug combinations that target multiple pathways can also delay the development of therapy resistance (11). Synergistic drug combinations may also allow for the reduction of dose levels of individual drugs used in the combination and thus reduce the risk of exposure-driven drug toxicities and drug resistance due to desensitization at the level of drug targets.

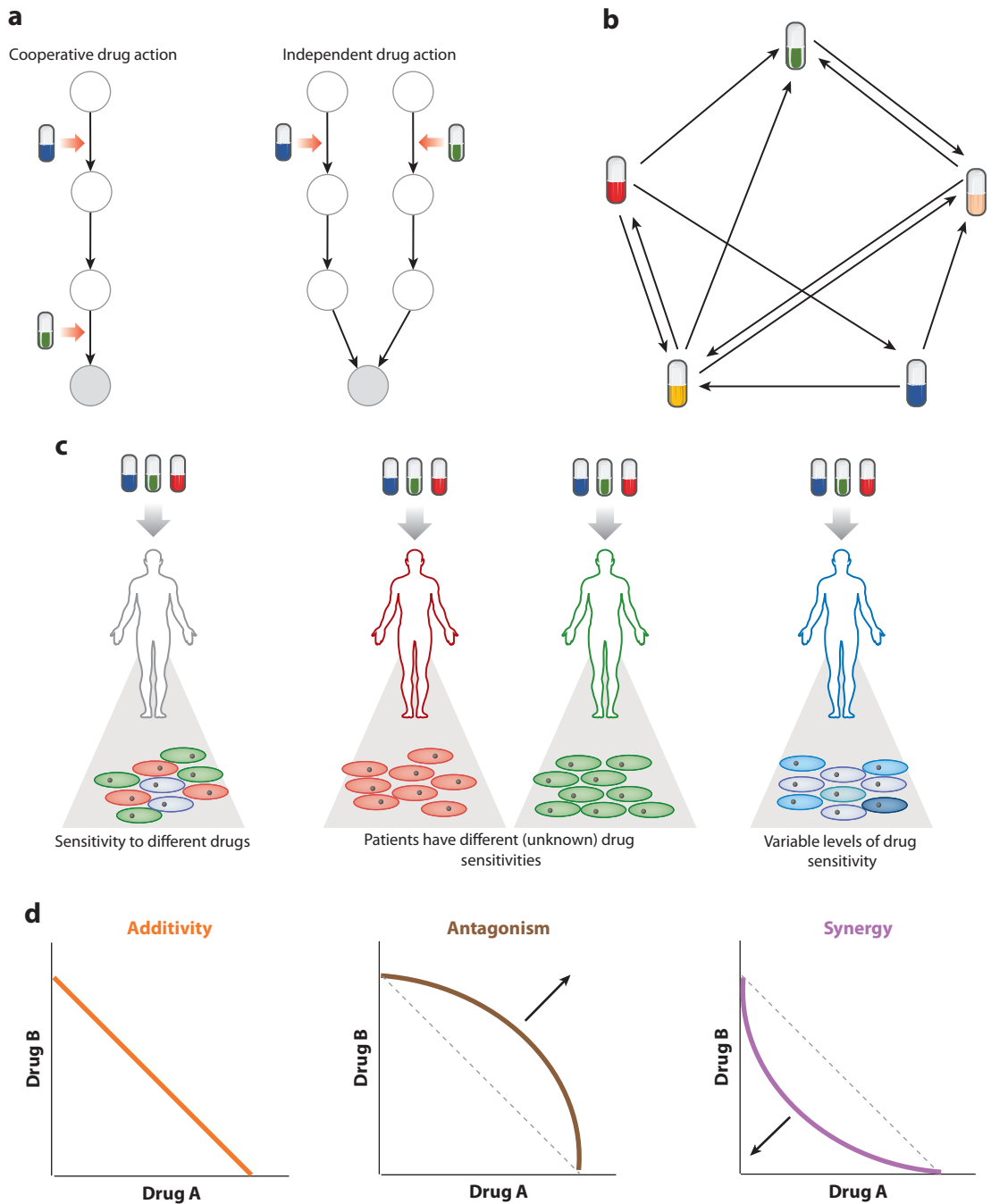
Heterogeneity in molecular characteristics of the disease within patients and variability between patients in molecular disease characteristics represent other rationales for the use of combinatorial therapies. Within-patient disease heterogeneity, e.g., tumor clonal variability, may be associated with variability in drug sensitivities across individual cells, and thus, combinatorial regimens may enable more efficient eradication of cells with variable drug sensitivities (30). When considering within-patient heterogeneity, adaptations or evolution of diseased cell populations can make selection of drug regimens even more complicated (31).

In the case of patient-to-patient variability in drug sensitivities, combination regimens may increase the possibility of at least one drug being efficacious and leading to a favorable treatment response (32) (**Figure 1c**). Similarly, such an approach has been used for empirical combination regimens for bacterial infections, where the antimicrobial susceptibility of the pathogen is often unknown (33). Ultimately, however, the development of personalized combination therapies for complex diseases needs to be guided by molecular characterization of the disease state to ultimately reach the goal of optimal treatment outcomes in every patient (34).

Combinatorial drug interactions may also occur at the pharmacokinetic (PK) level, where drugs can affect the absorption, metabolism, or elimination of another drug, for instance, through induction or inhibition of drug-metabolizing enzymes. This may lead to undesired changes in drug concentrations, resulting in toxicities or reduced efficacy. Alternatively, such interactions may also be therapeutically exploited, for instance, to boost drug exposure (35, 36).

For diseases in which the immune system plays a role, interest in combinatorial therapies that target the immune system has increased. For instance, the field of immuno-oncology has led to major advances in the treatment of malignancies, and strong interest exists in strategies to develop combination therapies that contain drugs to stimulate the immune system (37). However, the complexity of the immune system challenges rational identification of such regimens. In this case, multiscale systems pharmacological approaches where the responses of the immune system are considered in the context of the diseased tissue response could be used to develop rational combination therapies.

Prevention and reversal of resistance to drug treatment are two important applications of antimicrobial therapies. To this end, interest is increasing in the development of combinatorial therapies to combat the challenge of antimicrobial resistance. The occurrence of collateral sensitivity (**Figure 1b**), where resistance to one antibiotic leads to sensitivity to another antibiotic, has been



(Caption appears on following page)

Figure 1 (Figure appears on preceding page)

Several rationales exist for the effects of combination therapies. (a) Drugs may act in combination either in a serial fashion (*left*) or in a parallel fashion (*right*) on a signaling pathway component (*white circles*) that is associated with a downstream effect (*gray circle*). (b) The occurrence of collateral sensitivity, here depicted as a network of relationships between drug resistance (*arrow origin*) and associated drug sensitivity, can be exploited to design combinatorial therapies to restore drug sensitivity. (c) Heterogeneity in cellular drug sensitivity within patients (*left*) and between patients (*middle*) forms an important rationale for combinatorial regimens. Relative variability in drug sensitivity across cell types (*right*) can be addressed using resensitizing combination regimens. (d) Additive, synergistic, and antagonistic combinatory drug effects may be quantified by isobologram analysis. Collateral sensitivity network depicting relationships between drug resistance (*arrow origin*) and associated drug sensitivity.

suggested to enable a new paradigm for antibiotic combinatorial dosing to address antimicrobial resistance (38–41).

The design of drug combination regimens goes beyond the selection of particular therapeutic agents to be used together. PK and pharmacodynamic (PD) characteristics (42) can be very different for different drugs, and clinical dose regimens have to take such differences into account. Moreover, sequential combinatory drug regimens may have significant benefits, as well, as was shown for anticancer agents (43).

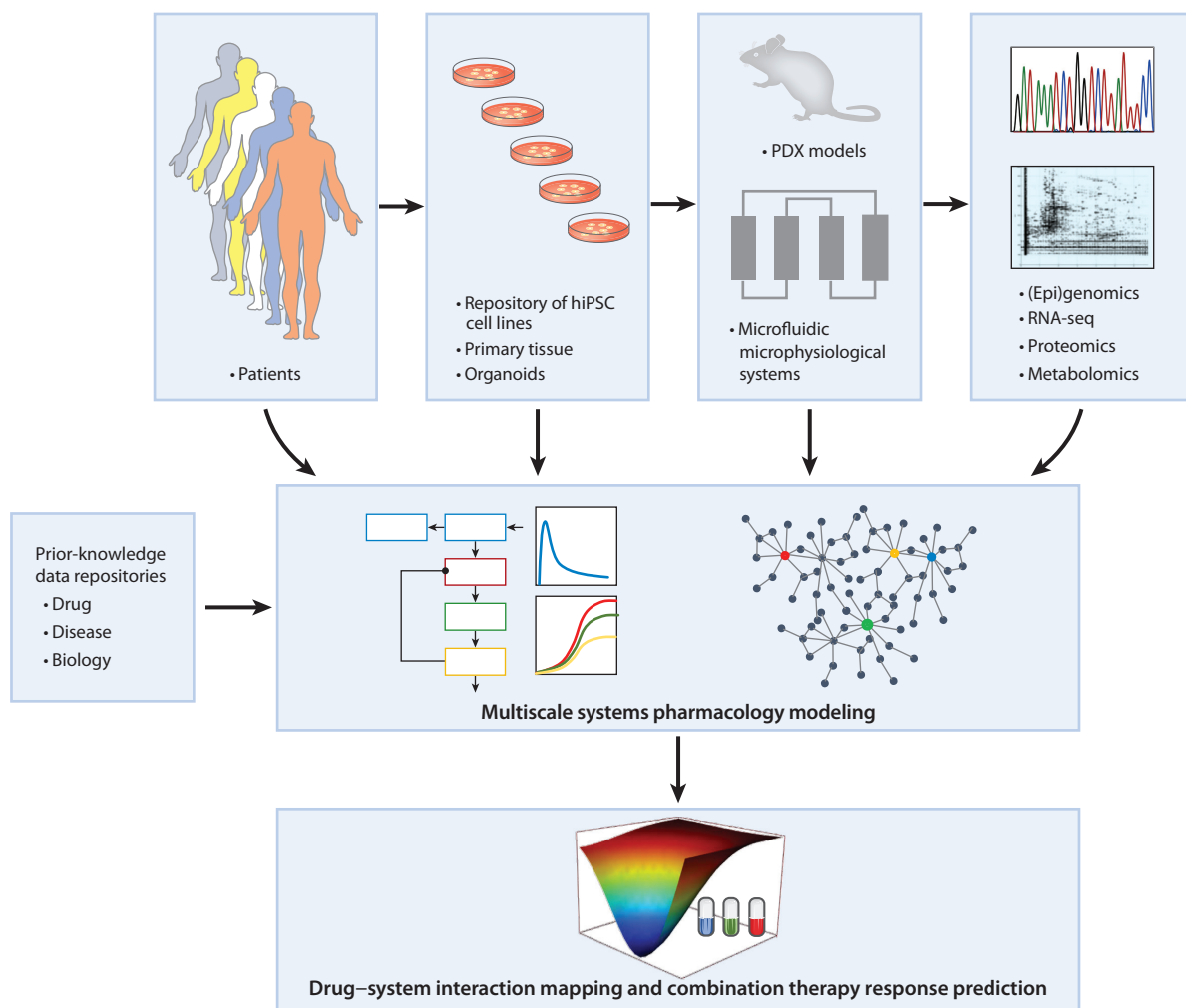
The quantification of combinatorial drug effects remains a debated field, where the Loewe additivity principle–based interaction index and the Bliss independence criterion remain the most important metrics (44, 45). The Loewe additivity principle (46) assumes that additivity of a combinatorial drug treatment is cooperative, as when it is mediated through a single mechanism. Isobologram analysis can be used to define the concentration of two drugs required for the maintenance of a constant level of output activity (**Figure 1d**). The Bliss independence criterion (47) assumes independence of drug effects and does not consider nonlinearities in dose–response curves. Antagonism or synergy is determined through observed deviations from the predicted additive response. These metrics are, however, primarily relevant to quantifying the end effects in an empirical fashion. For prediction of dosing regimens, quantitative systems-level approaches that consider molecular and physiological complexity are needed.

3. EXPERIMENTAL PLATFORMS TO EVALUATE DRUG COMBINATIONS

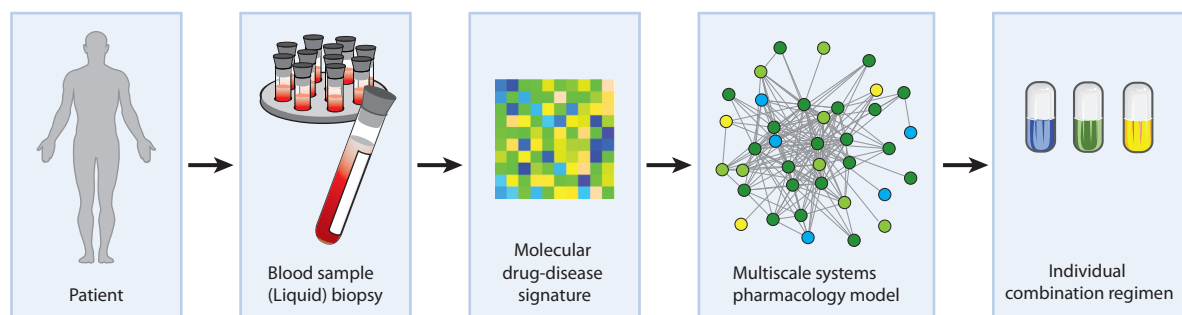
Combination therapy identification has been primarily driven by (large-scale) phenotypic screens in *in vitro* cell line–based assay systems (17, 18, 48, 49); these screens have limitations in terms of physiological relevance, i.e., translatability to humans from immortalized cell lines, and when considering complex diseases that involve more than one cell type. Furthermore, such screens can quickly become infeasible when expanding the therapy to more than two drug combinations or when evaluating larger panels of cell lines to recapitulate variability in drug response. Systems pharmacology approaches may enable more efficient identification of combinatorial regimens, and experimental platforms to screen and validate drug combination regimens in physiologically meaningful yet efficient ways are thus crucially important. An example of a systems pharmacology–enabled work flow is shown in **Figure 2**.

The use of human induced pluripotent stem cell (hiPSC)-derived differentiated cell lines in drug discovery and development has been quickly becoming more common (50–53). hiPSC-derived cell line panels, which can be subjected to selective mutagenesis, may allow us to recapitulate pharmacogenomic determinants of drug response present in the patient population, thus allowing conduct of *in vitro* clinical trials (54) through utilization of patient-derived cell lines. Genetic engineering approaches such as CRISPR–Cas9 can be used to create cell lines with particular drug response genotypes (55) or to reconstruct relevant disease-related molecular networks in cell lines

a Systems pharmacology-guided assessment of drug-disease interactions



b Systems pharmacology-guided personalized combination therapies



(Caption appears on following page)

Figure 2 (Figure appears on preceding page)

Systems pharmacology approaches for combination therapy development. (a) Systems pharmacology-guided assessment of drug-disease interactions is enabled by a combination of patient-derived data and cell lines and state-of-the-art translational models and molecular profiling technologies, which enable characterization of multiscale drug-disease systems pharmacology models. (b) Patient-specific (liquid) biopsies analyzed with molecular profiling technologies can be used as inputs to established systems pharmacology platforms to predict optimal individualized combination regimens. Abbreviations: hiPSC, human induced pluripotent stem cell; PDX, patient-derived xenograft.

that can then be potentially useful in identifying efficacious drug combinations. For instance, a multiplexed CRISPR-Cas9 approach has been described utilizing barcoded combinatorial gene perturbations in human cell lines that could be translated into novel drug combination strategies (56).

Organoid 3D cell culture models of human cells are increasingly recognized as *ex vivo* models that are potentially more relevant to study disease and drug effects as these models better represent cellular heterogeneity and differentiation (25, 57). hiPSC-derived cell lines, as well as primary human cells, have been used to develop organoid models. A noteworthy development has been the creation of a living organoid biobank of colorectal cancer patients, enabling screening of drug treatment response (58). The majority of organoids have been developed for identification of cancer therapy (57). However, for many other tissues, organoid models have been generated using hiPSC-derived cell lines, including for the kidney (59) and the lung (60) and for human tissue-derived pancreatic organoids with endocrine differentiation potential (61).

Complex diseases typically involve multiple physiologically interconnected tissues. MPSs represent a rapidly developing field that combines multiple organ-on-a-chip cell or organoid cultures on a single microfluidic platform (62). Several complex multi-organ MPS models have been described, including an MPS that uses human cells to couple intestine, liver, kidney proximal tubules, the blood-brain barrier, and skeletal muscle (24). MPSs are of significant interest for drug discovery (63) and could potentially allow the study combinatorial drug treatments with more physiological relevance than single-cell-type or tissue cultures and with the possibility for medium-throughput scalability. MPSs naturally integrate with multiscale systems pharmacology models (64, 65) and have been explored for screening combinatorial therapies in patient-derived tissue (66).

Patient-derived xenograft (PDX) models consisting of engrafted tumor tissue from patients are of increasing interest for screening of drug combination regimens in the field of oncology. PDX models take into account the tumor microenvironment and allow assessment of genomic variability between tumors as seen in the patient population. Large biobank PDX repositories have been established (67, 68) that can enable preclinical phase II trials of drug (combination) regimens (67–70). Although some concerns have been raised regarding PDX models (71), they currently remain among the best systems to test drugs to predict responses in humans. One feature that makes PDX models valuable is that they preserve intratumor heterogeneity (68).

4. SYSTEMS-LEVEL MEASUREMENT OF COMBINATORY DRUG INTERACTIONS

Molecular profiling methods such as RNA-Seq (72), proteomics (73), and metabolomics (74–76) are of great relevance to mapping systems-level molecular interactions in response to (combinatorial) drug treatments. These technologies can be used for the development of novel combinations of drugs to study mechanisms through which such combinatorial regimens act and to study how

variability across cell lines or patient samples may explain differences in combinatorial drug treatment response.

Integrative analyses of multiple molecular profiling data sets can add insight into combinatorial drug response. For instance, combining (phospho-)proteomics and transcriptomics has allowed for systems-level analysis of drug combinations and synergy in imatinib-resistant chronic myeloid leukemia cells (77). Other examples include the use of whole genome sequencing of patient-derived melanoma circulating tumor cells to evaluate the potential for personalized combination therapies for melanoma (78) and the combination of genomic and transcriptomic profiles in cell line panels to predict two-drug combination therapies (79).

During drug development of novel combinatorial regimens, chemogenomic (80) approaches can be used to elucidate the role of a particular genomic background and the resulting molecular systems-level responses to individual and combinatorial regimens. For instance, chemogenomic approaches have been used to identify novel antibiotic combination therapies (81). Similarly, CRISPR-Cas9 screens are relevant to the systematic mapping of drug combinations associated with particular genetic profiles to identify combinatorial therapies to prevent anticancer drug resistance (82).

Cellular molecular heterogeneity is now increasingly recognized as a major factor that can explain the failure of drug therapy, particularly in cancer. Combinatorial therapies have been suggested as a crucial approach to addressing such intratumor heterogeneity and associated treatment response (30, 31, 83). Emerging single-cell analytical tools, such as single-cell transcriptomics, are thus of great interest for their potential to support development of combinatorial therapies (84–86). For instance, single-cell phosphoproteomic profiling allowed the characterization of signaling dynamics and the selection and validation of combination therapies for a glioblastoma *in vivo* model (86).

The Connectivity Map (87) offers insights into similarities and differences in drug perturbation molecular response profiles, as it contains transcriptomic signatures of a variety of drugs in human cell lines. The Library of Integrated Network-based Cellular Signatures (LINCS) program of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) could be viewed as a follow-up to this effort and contains multi-omics drug perturbation response profiles in healthy and disease-associated human cell lines, including hiPSC-derived cell line panels (88). Tools such as L1000FWD further enable exploration of such databases in an efficient manner (89). An overview of some resources to support systems pharmacology-based modeling efforts is provided in **Table 1**.

5. ANALYSIS OF MOLECULAR DRUG-DISEASE NETWORK INTERACTIONS

High-throughput omics data, which can be generated to profile the molecular response to single or combination drug treatments in experimental models and patients, require a formalized framework to transform these data into biological and pharmacological knowledge at a systems level. Such analyses can be supported by existing large-scale databases that contain information about molecular interaction networks (90), transcriptomic drug perturbation profiling (87), chemical binding affinity and bioactivity profiles (91), and existing approved or investigational drug combination regimens (92). Analysis of omics data in conjunction with such databases of prior knowledge can enable development of molecular networks to map and quantify interactions of drug combinations (93–100).

Different mathematical formalisms may be used for this purpose depending on the available level of molecular and kinetic information, including undirected molecular interaction networks (e.g., protein-protein interaction networks), directional logic models, and full kinetic models that

Table 1 Overview of relevant data repositories to support systems pharmacology combination therapy discovery

| Repository | Description | URL | Reference |
|-----------------|---|---|-----------|
| DCDB | Database of approved and investigational drug combinations | http://www.cls.zju.edu.cn/dcdb/ | 92 |
| NIH LINCS | Repository containing large-scale cellular drug perturbation data | http://lincsportal.ccs.miami.edu/ | 135 |
| STITCH | Chemical–protein interaction network database | http://stitch.embl.de/ | 136 |
| DrugBank | Drug characteristics database including drug targets and pharmacology | http://drugbank.ca/ | NA |
| ChEMBL | Database of bioactive molecules and bioactivity data | https://www.ebi.ac.uk/chembl/ | 91 |
| ConsensusPathDB | Pathway database with integration of multiple pathway databases available | http://cpdb.molgen.mpg.de | 90 |

Abbreviations: DCDB, Drug Combination Database; LINCS, Library for Integrated Network-based Cellular Signatures; NA, not applicable; NIH, National Institutes of Health.

may describe, for instance, signal transduction kinetics. Such models, which capture both network configurations and signaling dynamics, can be used to develop enhanced pharmacodynamics models that can quantitatively account for genomic and epigenomic alterations that lead to drug sensitivity or drug resistance (101).

One example of such analyses includes the interaction networks informed by the gene expression Connectivity Map data that were used to rank optimal drug combination therapies (102). Another example is the development of protein interaction networks to characterize TRAIL-induced apoptosis, and to identify potential targets for combination therapy (103). Molecular interaction network analysis has also been used to identify combinatorial regimens that may reduce the risk for cardiovascular adverse drug reactions (104). Coupling of hiPSC-derived cell lines and pharmacogenomic profiling could potentially allow the development of individualized combinatorial therapies that reduce the risk for adverse drug reactions (54).

Logic-based network models use Boolean relationships to define stimulatory or inhibiting relationships between nodes; they are increasingly being used in QSP as middle-out network models that do not require full kinetic parametrization but are much more informative than an undirected network (105–107). Several variants of logic modeling have been used, including those that utilize fuzzy logic and those that use Hill equations (105, 106, 108). Logic models have been shown to be relevant to the prediction of drug combination effects. For instance, a fuzzy logic ensemble model of intracellular signaling in hepatocellular carcinoma was used to predict the effects of key transcription factors associated with treatment response (109). Another example is the development of Boolean modeling of ErbB signaling pathways to investigate combinatorial drug targets for treatment of trastuzumab-resistant breast cancer (110).

Kinetic models describing molecular interaction networks such as for signal transduction allow us to consider multiscale models to predict combinatory drug effects. Parameterization of kinetic models can be challenging. Recently, it has been shown that transcriptomic profiling data derived from glioblastoma patient-derived tumor samples can be used to inform kinetic systems pharmacology models to conduct virtual drug combination trials (111). Another example described the prediction of combination therapies for B-cell lymphoma using a kinetic model of the B-cell receptor signaling network (112).

6. PHARMACOKINETIC–PHARMACODYNAMIC MODELING

To characterize and predict clinical-level effects of combinatory treatments at the organ and organismal levels, scaling from molecular-level network models to higher-level physiological response markers is needed. To this end, PK and PD mathematical models (42, 113, 114) are relevant. PK models describe the absorption, distribution, elimination, and metabolism of drugs in the body, where systems pharmacology–based, physiologically based PK (PBPK) models can predict local tissue target site concentrations based on system-specific tissue parameters and drug-specific physicochemical parameters (115). Drug combinatory effects may already occur at the PK level, for instance, through inhibition or induction of drug metabolizing enzymes. PBPK modeling can be used to quantify and predict such drug–drug interactions (116). Moreover, PBPK modeling approaches may help to translate among experimental models that do not account for the effects of drug metabolites or the occurrence of drug protein binding.

PK-PD models typically described biomarker-based physiological responses at the time scale of clinical treatment regimens. They allow one to effectively quantify and model interindividual variability and to account for comorbidities that may be present. PK-PD modeling is used extensively to support dose optimization in translational and clinical drug development (21, 117) and has been specifically used to investigate combinatory effects of drugs, for instance, to predict synergistic activity of gemcitabine and trabectedin in pancreatic cancer cells (118), to model tumor growth and anticancer effects of combination therapy in animal models (119), and for interspecies scaling of combination therapies for vasoconstriction (120).

7. MULTISCALE SYSTEMS PHARMACOLOGY MODELS TO PREDICT COMBINATORIAL TREATMENT REGIMENS

Systems pharmacology models that aim to predict optimal (pre-)clinical combination dose regimens should ideally consist of multiscale models that include PBPK models for drug target site concentrations, target binding kinetic models, kinetic or network-based downstream signal transduction models, and PD models that integrate molecular-level events with higher time scales and treatment response biomarkers. Such integration of network-based models for signal transduction and higher-level response have been described for the epidermal growth factor receptor pathway (101). Another example explicitly integrated PK-PD modeling with a model of the vascular endothelial growth factor signaling pathway to explore combinatory treatment regimens (121). Approaches to potentially associating logic-based models with PK-PD models have also been described (122). Agent-based models linked to network and PK-PD models are also of interest to the computational study of the impact of cell-to-cell heterogeneity in response to combinatorial treatments (123). A schematic overview of how the different technologies and modeling formalisms can be integrated to support combination therapy development is provided in **Figure 3**.

One current challenge in which multiscale systems pharmacology modeling approaches could be relevant concerns the identification of combinatorial regimens that target the immune system, such as in the field of immuno-oncology (37, 124, 125). Such models need to take into consideration the complex PK of typical large molecule immune therapeutics, as well as both inter- and intracellular immune signaling mechanisms.

8. BRIDGING SYSTEMS PHARMACOLOGY AND MACHINE LEARNING

Developments in the field of machine learning and artificial intelligence–based learning approaches are occurring at a brisk pace (126). As larger electronic health record data sets become

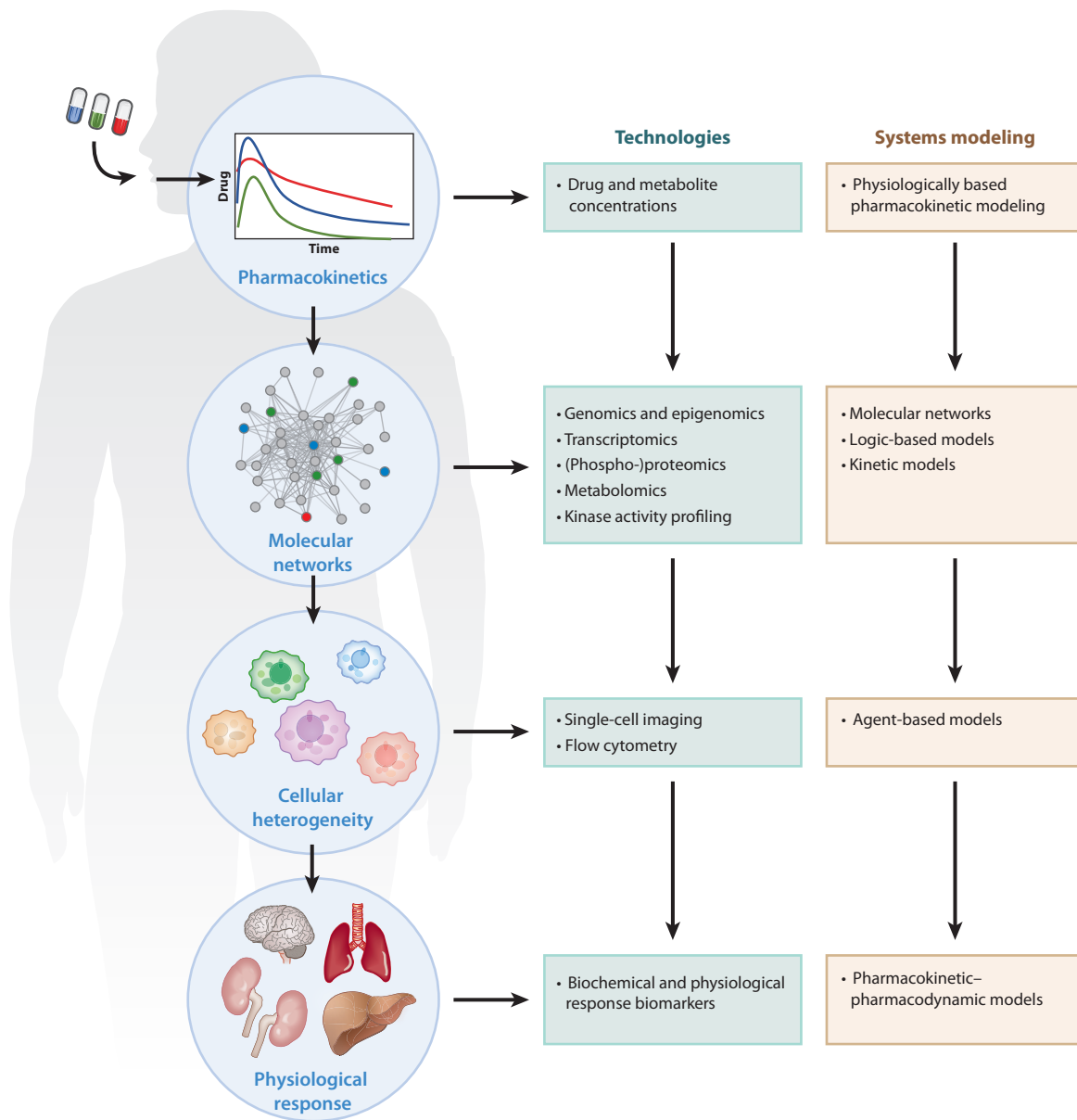


Figure 3

Drug efficacy of combination therapies is mediated by the interaction of several physiological and pharmacological processes that occur across multiple scales of time and space, including drug (target-site) pharmacokinetics, signal transduction, the effects of cellular heterogeneity, and ultimate organ (system)-specific physiological response. Quantitative systems pharmacology approaches allow us to integrate prior knowledge and patient-specific data across these scales to infer optimized combination regimens.

available, further integration of the genomic and epigenomic information of individual patients with clinical data can help us understand the genetic contributions to many complex diseases. Additionally, efforts to combine large-scale multi-omics data sets with kinetic systems pharmacology models could benefit from the use of machine learning algorithms (127). Already, machine learning-based approaches have already proven to be relevant to the prediction of optimal combination therapies (27, 128) and allow integration of phenotypic, therapeutic, chemical, and genomic properties to predict drug-drug interactions (129). Also, the integration of signaling network models with machine learning approaches has recently been reported (130). Further development of machine learning approaches may also enable us to fully utilize existing and rapidly expanding large-scale databases for experimental and clinical drug combination studies. For such data sets, it remains crucial to ensure high data quality standards, particularly for the field of systems pharmacology (131). Recent initiatives such as the NIH LINCS project have ensured that such standards are being met (88).

9. CASE STUDY: COMBINATION THERAPY DISCOVERY THROUGH TRANSCRIPTOMIC PROFILING, NETWORK ANALYSIS IN IN VITRO CELL LINES, AND PATIENT-DERIVED XENOGRRAFT MODELS

Recent studies in our laboratory (132) have demonstrated how systems pharmacology approaches can be used to identify drug combinations using bulk transcriptomic data. Network modeling of these data allow us to extract signatures of expression patterns that could be used to predict responsiveness to drug therapy. We computationally analyzed TCGA data (133) for lung adenocarcinoma patients and identified a subset in which xanthine dehydrogenase expression correlated with decreased survival. We tested whether xanthine dehydrogenase inhibits proliferation in a panel of human non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) cell lines and identified sensitive and resistant cell lines. Bulk gene expression profiles of these cell lines were used to identify six-gene signatures for allopurinol-sensitive and -resistant cell lines. Network development and analyses identified JAK2 as an additional target in allopurinol-resistant lines. Treatment of resistant cell lines with allopurinol and the JAK2 inhibitor CEP-33779 resulted in cell death. We then utilized the six-gene signatures to predict five additional allopurinol-sensitive NSCLC lines and four allopurinol-resistant lines susceptible to combination therapy. We found that drug treatment of all cell lines yielded the responses that were predicted by the genomic signatures. We used these signatures to search a repository of PDX NSCLC tumors to identify tumors that would be predicted to be sensitive to monotherapy or combination therapy. Patient-derived tumors predicted to be allopurinol sensitive or susceptible to combination therapy showed the predicted drug response. Although this study does not show that we can predict responsiveness in the clinic, it provides a systems-based approach to predicting both drug resistance and sensitivity to combination therapy.

10. CASE STUDY: COMBINATORY THERAPY DISCOVERY FOR NERVE REGENERATION

Tissue organization adds an additional level of complexity to consider in setting up combination therapy. In an example from our laboratory (134), we used a systems pharmacology approach to develop a four-drug combination to functionally regenerate axons after nerve crushes. We reasoned that some drugs could be protective and promote regeneration by acting at the cell body, while other drugs might be more efficacious if applied at the site where the nerves were injured. This application of drugs at different locations could increase neuronal regenerative

capacity by regulating multiple subcellular processes at the cell body, while drugs near the injury site would help grow long axons in inhibitory environments. Dynamical computational models of neurite outgrowth showed that the transcriptional effects of drugs applied at the cell body served as a base, such that a combination of drugs that work locally near the site of the injured axons could produce extensive synergistic growth. We used the optic nerve crush in rats to test the drug combinations. We intravitreally injected two drugs, cannabinoid receptor-1 agonist HU-210 and IL-6 (interleukin 6 receptor agonist) to stimulate retinal ganglion cells whose axons had been crushed, and applied two drugs in gel foam, Taxol to stabilize microtubules and activated protein C to potentially clear the injury site debris field. Morphology experiments using the injured optic nerve showed that the four-drug combination promoted robust axonal regeneration from the retina to the optic chiasm and on to the visual cortex. The four-drug treatment restored pattern electroretinograms, and approximately 25% of the animals had detectable visual evoked potentials in the brain. These studies show that combination therapy that takes into account morphological complexity can promote functional axonal regeneration after nerve injury.

11. CONCLUSIONS

Systems pharmacology-based approaches offer a unique tool set to characterize and predict the multiscale interactions of drug combinations and the resulting effects, as they allow multiscale integration of molecular-level profiling data with data from the organ level and clinical treatment response. A key potential of systems pharmacology-based approaches is to combine information regarding genomic determinants of individuals with multiscale data on drug action to predict the action of specific drug combinations in individuals. These types of predictions are likely to be very useful in precision medicine. Systems pharmacology approaches can support the development of combinatorial regimens beyond the initial phases of drug discovery, providing valuable insights for both preclinical animal studies and clinical drug development. Encouraging results have been described in recent years with respect to predictions of combinatorial regimens guided by systems pharmacology approaches. However, further studies and development of new approaches are needed to optimize and catalog strategies to allow us to develop more straightforward applications for combination therapy in drug development and to enable personalized medicine in the clinic for many complex diseases. The majority of current developments have been in the field of oncology, but in many cases, these approaches may be adapted for other diseases as larger molecular and tissue- and organ-level, as well as clinical, data sets become available.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Systems pharmacology approaches that integrate consideration of drug action at the molecular, cellular, organ and organismal levels can enable discovery of new combinatorial drug treatments to improve treatment of diseases.
2. Enabling technologies, such as single-cell transcriptomics, hiPSC-derived cell line libraries, and organ-on-a-chip MPSs, represent key platforms to enable systems pharmacology-guided combination therapy identification.
3. Multiscale systems pharmacology modeling approaches, including network analysis, dynamical modeling of signal transduction, agent-based modeling, and PBPK and PK-PD modeling, offer tool sets to enable data integration across experimental models and to allow patients to support discovery and development of novel combination regimens.

4. Integration of systems pharmacology modeling approaches with machine learning and artificial intelligence-based approaches may further enhance our ability to select combination regimens.
5. Combinatorial therapies that rationally address disease variability across patients and within-patient cellular disease heterogeneity, as well as the development of host-directed combinatorial therapies that utilize the immune system, offer unique strategies to improve outcomes in patients.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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LITERATURE CITED

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