

Platinum Resistance in Ovarian Cancer

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Chemotherapeutic drug resistance is a major impediment in the treatment of cancer. Platinum containing chemotherapeutic agents are the first-line therapy for the treatment of ovarian cancer. Unfortunately, resistance to platinum agents such as cisplatin and carboplatin commonly occurs in ovarian cancer patients. Numerous mechanisms such as enhanced DNA repair, decreased apoptosis, and increased drug export and elimination contribute to the occurrence of platinum resistance. Alternative therapies, combination chemotherapy, altered route of administration, and less conventional methods such as whole body hyperthermia have been developed in attempts to overcome platinum resistance and to enhance responsiveness in ovarian cancer patients. The commonly used method to overcome platinum resistance is administration of second line chemotherapeutic agents such as liposomal doxorubicin, taxanes, topotecan, and gemcitabine. Unfortunately, no unifying method exists to enhance responsiveness in platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients, and most patients resistant to platinum agents tend to be resistant to other chemotherapeutic agents as well. Mechanisms of platinum resistance and attempts to overcome this in ovarian cancer will be reviewed.

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The objective of cancer treatment is to eliminate cancer cells, and this can be achieved by surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy¹. Chemotherapy is the primary treatment for cancer, however, there are limitations. The successful treatment of many types of cancer has been severely hindered by the development of resistance to chemotherapeutic agents (drug resistance). Determining the mechanisms contributing to drug resistance is important in order to potentially bypass resistance and enhance patient responsiveness to chemotherapeutic agents. Drug resistance is thought to be multi-factorial and perhaps due to the co-existence of multiple mechanisms. Mechanisms believed to contribute to the occurrence of platinum drug resistance in ovarian cancer will be reviewed.

Platinum containing chemotherapeutic agents such as cisplatin (Platinol®) and carboplatin (Paraplatin®) have proven effective in the treatment of numerous cancers^{2,3}. These agents invoke cytotoxicity by inducing DNA damage through the formation of DNA-interstrand and intrastrand crosslinks^{2,6}. When DNA damage is unable to be repaired, the damaged cells undergo programmed cell death (apoptosis).

Unfortunately, resistance to platinum containing drugs is common in cancer treatment⁷. Platinum containing chemotherapeutic agents are the first-line therapy used in the treatment of ovarian cancer⁸. However, greater than 50% of ovarian cancer patients acquire resistance to chemotherapeutic agents, including platinum agents, following initial treatment making further therapy ineffective^{2,7,9}. Numerous mechanisms have been found that contribute to the occurrence of platinum resistance in ovarian cancer.

Cancer's Mechanisms of Resistance

Altered drug transport

Multi-drug resistance (MDR) is a phenomenon that occurs when cells are resistant to numerous drugs that are structurally

unrelated¹⁰. Numerous drug resistant cancers have been shown to overexpress the drug transporters P-glycoprotein, multi-drug resistance related protein (MRP) and lung resistance related protein (LRP), which lead to increased efflux of drugs out of cancer cells^{7,10,11}. Seventy-seven percent of ovarian cancers were found to overexpress LRP, which correlated with decreased sensitivity to treatment^{7,8,12}.

Glutathione

Glutathione (GSH) functions in membrane transport, drug inactivation and elimination by conjugation with substances such as platinum containing agents^{1,11,13}. Therefore, overexpression of either GSH or the enzyme responsible for GSH conjugation, glutathione S-transferase (GST), results in decreased sensitivity to these agents^{11,14}. The effect of GSH on platinum resistance has recently been investigated, and over-expression of GSH has been found in platinum resistant ovarian cancer cells. Studies by Mistry et al.¹⁵ and Godwin et al.¹⁶ correlated high levels of GSH to platinum resistance in ovarian cancer cell lines.

Accumulation and removal of adducts

The difference in accumulation versus removal of platinum-DNA adducts has been investigated in platinum sensitive and resistant cell lines. These studies concluded that the increased ability of cancer cells to remove DNA adducts formed by platinum compounds contributes to platinum resistance, and not decreased accumulation of adducts^{17,18}.

DNA repair

Enhanced DNA repair can lead to drug resistance by repairing the damage induced by DNA damaging chemotherapeutic agents^{19,22}. Enhanced efficiency of DNA repair has been shown to be a common mechanism of platinum resistance^{20,22,23}. Studies by Masuda et al.²⁰ and Lai et al.²² demonstrated increased DNA repair in a cisplatin resistant ovarian cancer cell line compared to the cisplatin sensitive

parental cell line. The authors concluded that sensitive cells are unable to effectively recognize and repair the lesions caused by cisplatin treatment, thereby leading to cytotoxicity²². In addition, overexpression of DNA repair proteins has been implicated in platinum resistant ovarian cancer cells and patients. The repair proteins DNA polymerase β , ERCC1 and XPAC have been found to be overexpressed in platinum resistant ovarian cancer cells or patients²⁴⁻²⁶.

Alternatively, cells deficient in DNA mismatch repair (MMR) are unable to recognize damaged DNA and induce apoptosis, also resulting in resistance²⁷⁻²⁹. MMR plays a role in recognition of DNA adducts formed by platinum agents causing apoptosis of the damaged cell. Therefore, cells with defective MMR will be unable to recognize these adducts and fail to induce apoptosis, thereby resulting in platinum resistance^{27,28}.

Modulation of apoptosis

To this end, failure to induce apoptosis is an additional mechanism for the occurrence of drug resistance, by allowing cancer cells to survive the damage induced by chemotherapeutic agents^{19,21}. The tumor suppressor gene p53 is the most commonly mutated gene in cancer, and functions in regulation of the cell cycle and induction of apoptosis^{1,30}. Modulation of p53 can therefore cause drug resistance by failure of the damaged cells to induce apoptosis following damage^{11,31}. A recent study revealed that resistance to platinum therapy was significantly correlated with mutated or over-expressed p53³². Branch et al.¹⁹ studied the role of p53 mutants and defective MMR and found mutated p53, not defective MMR, to be the major cause of cisplatin resistance in ovarian cancer cells. This study contradicts results reported above, however, a comparative analysis was not done between p53 status and MMR to investigate a potential role for p53²⁷⁻²⁹. Although MMR-induced apoptosis can also occur via a p53 independent pathway^{33,34}, studies by Wu et al.³⁴ indicated both MMR and p53 are likely necessary for apoptosis induced by chemical agents, such as cisplatin.

Clearly, studies to date have not agreed upon a single mechanism responsible for the occurrence of platinum resistance in ovarian cancer, and likely, it is a combination of mechanisms that may impede successful treatment. In an effort to bypass the hindrance of platinum resistance common to ovarian cancer treatment, additional treatment regimes are being studied with hopes of improving patient responsiveness.

Overcoming Platinum Resistance

Since numerous mechanisms are involved in platinum resistance, many approaches have been investigated to overcome platinum resistance. Some therapies focus on mechanisms to enhance sensitivity to platinum by increasing tumor cytotoxicity, cellular uptake, and biodistribution. Alternative therapies have been tested alone and in combination with platinum to enhance ovarian cancer patient

responsiveness in platinum refractory disease.

Glutathione depletion

As discussed above, GSH overexpression can contribute to the occurrence of platinum resistance in ovarian cancer, therefore decreasing levels of GSH can potentially bypass this mechanism of resistance^{11,14-16,35}. Buthionine sulfoximine (BSO) can decrease cellular levels of GSH in cancer patients, with approximately 50% of cancer patients showing markedly decreased cellular levels of GSH³⁶. Although BSO alters sensitivity to platinum and other agents in cancer cells³⁵⁻³⁷, this treatment was not directly correlated with increased sensitivity to platinum in ovarian cancer patients and is not used clinically. Future therapies, however, may utilize BSO to increase responsiveness to platinum therapy in ovarian cancer patients with elevated GSH levels.

Cyclosporin A

Cyclosporin A (Neoral[®], Sandimmune[®]) has been implicated in the reversal of resistance to chemotherapeutic agents³⁸. Cyclosporin A and platinum combination therapy resulted in only a minimal response rate in platinum resistant ovarian cancer, indicating that this treatment would not be effective in platinum resistant ovarian cancer³⁹⁻⁴¹.

Liposomal encapsulation of chemotherapeutic agents

Encapsulation of drugs in liposomes is emerging as a useful drug delivery mechanism, due to low toxicity and the potential to alter pharmacokinetic properties⁴². Liposomal encapsulated cisplatin has been tested for activity and has been suggested to be useful to overcome platinum resistance^{43,44}. The anti-tumor effect of one liposomal cisplatin agent, SPI-077, was superior compared to free cisplatin in terms of pharmacokinetics, biodistribution and cytotoxicity⁴⁴. The possibility of increased drug exposure to tumor cells without increased side effects of liposomal cisplatin could be beneficial to platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients.

Other liposomal encapsulated chemotherapeutic agents such as doxorubicin (Caelyx[®], Doxil[®]) are being used effectively in the treatment of platinum resistant ovarian cancer^{45,46}. Liposomal doxorubicin could therefore be used as a possible alternative treatment for platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients to enhance responsiveness, and indeed is frequently used as second-line therapy in platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients.

Taxanes

Chemotherapeutic agents that differ in mechanism of action compared to platinum are being used for treatment of platinum resistant ovarian cancer. Taxanes, such as paclitaxel (Taxol[®]), have been found to be useful in the treatment of ovarian cancer⁴⁷. Taxanes do not rely on p53 mediated induction of apoptosis for cytotoxicity²¹. A comparative study examining p53 status and sensitivity to either platinum or taxanes in ovarian cancer patients found mutant p53 conferred resistance to only platinum, whereas these patients remained sensitive to taxanes²¹. Hence, ovarian

cancer patients resistant to platinum therapy due to defective p53 remain sensitive to taxanes²¹. Paclitaxel is approved for first-line therapy and is used frequently for the treatment of advanced ovarian cancer patients resistant to platinum.

Combination therapy

Other research has addressed the possibility that platinum agents administered in combination with other chemotherapeutic agents could enhance responsiveness by acting via different mechanisms of action to increase cytotoxicity. Stiff et al.^{48,49} investigated the co-administration of mitoxantrone (Novantrone®), carboplatin, and cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan®, Procytox®) followed by autologous bone marrow rescue in platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients compared to platinum sensitive patients. Forty-seven percent of resistant patients achieved complete response versus 88% of sensitive patients in a phase II study⁴⁹. Although combination chemotherapy is commonly used, autologous bone marrow rescue is not used for the treatment of ovarian cancer, although it may be beneficial.

Platinum analogues

Oxaliplatin is a platinum analogue that has been shown to be cytotoxic to tumor cells resistant to cisplatin and carboplatin, including ovarian tumor cells. Oxaliplatin appears to be more effective at inducing DNA damage than cisplatin, due to utilization of a different mechanism of action⁵⁰. MMR is necessary for cisplatin induced cytotoxicity, however, MMR does not play a role in oxaliplatin mediated cytotoxicity⁵⁰. Hence, ovarian cancer patients resistant to cisplatin and carboplatin may be responsive to oxaliplatin, making oxaliplatin a potentially useful therapeutic option for platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients.

Whole body hyperthermia

Hyperthermia has been shown to enhance cytotoxicity and the therapeutic index of platinum⁵¹⁻⁵³. Cellular accumulation of platinum and tumor cytotoxicity are increased by hyperthermia, whereas normal tissue toxicity is not greatly affected^{51,52}. Estermann et al.⁵³ subjected platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients to whole body hyperthermia to raise systemic temperature to 41.8°C, followed by carboplatin treatment, and achieved a 35.7% response rate. The mechanism of action of this effect has not been determined, however, it is suggested that this change in temperature may cause drug accumulation and adduct formation to increase and DNA repair to decrease⁵³. Although these results seem promising, hyperthermia is not a commonly used therapy to overcome resistance.

Aphidicolin

As described above, increased DNA repair can confer resistance to platinum agents^{20,22}. Aphidicolin disrupts DNA repair via inhibition of DNA polymerases, hence, numerous studies have looked at the ability of aphidicolin treatment to overcome platinum resistance^{22,54}. An in vivo study showed aphidicolin and platinum administered in combination can

overcome platinum resistance⁵⁵. A recent study determined that MMR deficient ovarian cancer cells resistant to platinum have increased platinum sensitivity following aphidicolin treatment⁵⁶. Although the studies investigating aphidicolin indicate it could be useful, aphidicolin is not administered for the treatment of resistant ovarian cancer patients.

Intraperitoneal administration

Platinum agents are typically administered intravenously (I.V.), however, studies have shown that intraperitoneal (I.P.) administration of platinum agents can be more effective in the treatment of ovarian cancer⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹. Greater cisplatin levels were achieved in the peritoneal cavity resulting in greater survival and fewer side effects in a phase III study⁵⁷. Thirty-six percent of the patients that received I.V. cisplatin responded to therapy, compared to 47% of patients treated intraperitoneally⁵⁷. A critical limitation to this study is that patients were previously untreated; therefore, it is unknown whether the patients would have initially been sensitive to platinum therapy. A previous study by Kirmani et al.⁵⁹ treated ovarian cancer patients with persistent or recurrent disease who had previously failed treatment. This study demonstrated a complete response rate of 65%, indicating I.P. administered cisplatin therapy could circumvent platinum resistance⁵⁹. I.P. administration may prove to be a mechanism to enhance responsiveness to platinum therapy in resistant tumors due to the enhanced exposure of the tumor cells to platinum⁵⁹.

Additional second-line therapies

In addition to the therapies discussed above, topotecan and gemcitabine are frequently used in platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients⁶⁰. Topotecan (Hycamtin®) is a topoisomerase I inhibitor shown to be active in platinum resistant ovarian cancer and is indicated for second-line treatment^{61,62}. The antimetabolite gemcitabine (Gemzar®) is frequently administered effectively in platinum resistant ovarian cancer patients^{60,63}.

Conclusion

Numerous mechanisms contribute to the occurrence of platinum resistance in ovarian cancer, and consequently, numerous therapeutic strategies have been developed to overcome resistance. Furthermore, additional mechanisms to bypass platinum resistance not discussed in this review are being evaluated. Therapies to alter the specific resistance mechanism or enhance drug concentration without increasing the occurrence of adverse effects will prove useful to circumvent resistance to platinum agents. With the development of novel chemotherapeutic agents and more selective targeting strategies, ovarian cancer patient responsiveness can be enhanced resulting in improved patient survival and quality of life. The commonly used approach for the treatment of platinum resistant ovarian cancer is the co-administration of additional chemotherapeutic agents, such as topotecan, gemcitabine and liposomal

doxorubicin. Despite the advancement in this area, no unifying mechanism causes drug resistance, therefore, no single mechanism will be able to bypass resistance. Additional work is needed to further our understanding of the mechanisms surrounding platinum resistance and modalities to overcome this problem in ovarian cancer treatment.

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