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Commentary

Adaptive Cellular Responses and Molecular Alterations That Contribute to Chemotherapy Resistance in Tumors

Michael Thompson*

Department of Molecular Oncology, Center for Cancer Research, Midwest University of Medical Sciences, Chicago, United States

DESCRIPTION

Chemotherapy remains a cornerstone in the management of cancer, aiming to eliminate rapidly dividing cells and control tumor growth. However, the effectiveness of chemotherapy is often compromised by the development of drug resistance, which can be broadly categorized into intrinsic and acquired resistance. Understanding the distinctions between these two forms of resistance, as well as their underlying mechanisms, is important for optimizing treatment strategies, improving patient outcomes and developing novel therapeutic approaches.

Intrinsic chemotherapy resistance, also referred to as primary resistance, is present before the initiation of treatment. In this case, cancer cells are inherently less sensitive or completely insensitive to chemotherapeutic agents. This resistance arises from pre-existing genetic, epigenetic and cellular factors that confer survival advantages to tumor cells. For example, mutations in tumor suppressor genes such as Tumor Protein p53 *(TP53)* or in oncogenes like Kirsten Rat Sarcoma Viral Oncogene Homolog *(KRAS)* can impair apoptosis or enhance proliferation, making the cells less susceptible to chemotherapy-induced cytotoxicity. Additionally, intrinsic resistance can be mediated by overexpression of drug efflux transporters, such as P-glycoprotein, which reduce intracellular drug accumulation. Other contributing factors include the presence of quiescent cancer stem cells, which are naturally less sensitive to drugs targeting rapidly dividing cells and alterations in the tumor microenvironment, such as hypoxia or stromal interactions, which can protect cancer cells from cytotoxic stress.

In contrast, acquired chemotherapy resistance, also known as secondary resistance, develops over the course of treatment. Initially, the cancer may respond to therapy, but over time, cells adapt and evolve mechanisms that allow them to survive subsequent exposures to the drug. Acquired resistance is often driven by selective pressure imposed by chemotherapy, which favors the survival of subpopulations of cells with advantageous genetic or epigenetic traits. For instance, mutations or amplification of genes involved in drug metabolism or Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) repair pathways can emerge, enabling cells to tolerate higher drug concentrations or repair chemotherapy-induced DNA damage more efficiently. Epigenetic modifications, such as changes in DNA methylation or histone acetylation, can also alter gene expression to promote cell survival. Moreover, acquired resistance may involve activation of alternative signaling pathways, such as Mitogen Activated Protein Kinase (MAPK), which bypass the cytotoxic effects of therapy and sustain cell proliferation.

Both intrinsic and acquired resistance are influenced by the tumor microenvironment. Hypoxic regions, acidic pH and interactions with stromal or immune cells can protect cancer cells from chemotherapeutic stress and contribute to both primary and secondary resistance. Additionally, cancer stem cells play a central role in acquired resistance. While a subset of these cells may survive initial chemotherapy due to their quiescent state and enhanced DNA repair capacity, they can later repopulate the tumor, leading to relapse and metastasis. This dynamic interplay between cellular heterogeneity and environmental factors complicates treatment and highlights the need for combination therapies that target multiple resistance mechanisms simultaneously.

The clinical implications of distinguishing intrinsic from acquired resistance are significant. Intrinsic resistance may indicate that a particular drug or regimen is unlikely to be effective, guiding oncologists to select alternative therapies from the outset. Acquired resistance, on the other hand, necessitates continuous monitoring of tumor response and may require adjustments in treatment strategy, such as switching to different chemotherapeutic agents, combining therapies, or incorporating targeted inhibitors that disrupt specific resistance pathways. Advances in molecular profiling and biomarker discovery have enabled better prediction of both types of resistance, allowing for personalized treatment approaches that maximize efficacy while minimizing toxicity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, chemotherapy resistance in cancer is a complex phenomenon that can be categorized as intrinsic or acquired.

Correspondence to: Michael Thompson, Department of Molecular Oncology, Center for Cancer Research, Midwest University of Medical Sciences, Chicago, United States, E-mail: m.thompson@midwestcms.edu

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Intrinsic resistance exists prior to treatment due to pre-existing cellular and molecular traits, whereas acquired resistance develops as cancer cells adapt to chemotherapy over time. Both forms involve genetic, epigenetic and microenvironmental factors, including alterations in drug transport, DNA repair, signaling pathways and cancer stem cell biology. Recognizing the distinctions and mechanisms underlying intrinsic and acquired resistance is essential for the design of effective treatment strategies, early identification of non-responders and development of novel therapies aimed at overcoming resistance. By integrating molecular insights with clinical management, it is possible to improve therapeutic outcomes and reduce the likelihood of relapse in cancer patients.