EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (EEJPH)

ISSN: 2992-4081 ©EEJPH Publications

Volume 7 Issue 2 2025

Genomic Medicine: Precision Therapies for Rare Diseases

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ABSTRACT

Genomic medicine is revolutionizing healthcare by leveraging genetic information to develop precision therapies, particularly for rare diseases, which affect approximately 300 million people worldwide. This field integrates cutting-edge genomic technologies, bioinformatics, and molecular studies to identify disease-causing mutations, elucidate pathogenesis, and design targeted treatments. The precision approach not only offers hope for those with limited therapeutic options but also advances our understanding of complex diseases. This paper examines the promise of precision therapies for rare diseases, the role of genomic technologies, ethical and logistical challenges, and success stories of patient-centered advancements. Finally, it highlights the need for collaborative, equitable, and sustainable models to integrate precision medicine into healthcare systems globally.

Keywords: Genomic medicine, precision therapy, rare diseases, genetic diagnostics, targeted treatment, personalized medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Genomic medicine is an emerging area of research and clinical practice that aims to integrate genomic knowledge into healthcare to advance disease prevention and improve diagnosis, and treatment strategies. Disease-causing genetic variants, particularly in the case of rare diseases and some complex disorders, frequently show high biological effects with substantial variation across individual genetic backgrounds. Genomic medicine thereby suggests developing more tailored, high-precision therapeutic strategies through genotype-guided patient stratification and selection/dosing of drugs. Further, the molecular and physiological study of such variants can promote a detailed biological understanding of the genes involved and suggest novel targets for drug discovery. Moving from a "one size fits all" approach to more precision/personalized medicine rooted in patients' genetic information is a highly desirable goal of de novo data generation since, conceivably, all diseases are influenced by some combination of genetic, environmental, behavioral, and information-carrying forces. Genomic medicine has the potential to be a game changer in healthcare, with its effects being seen primarily in prevention, and secondarily in diagnosis, treatment decisions, and how individuals perceive health and risk [1, 2]. In terms of treatment, precision therapy will argue its proponents, hold greater promise for complex diseases, chief among them psychiatric, endocrine/metabolic, and immune conditions, than for the relatively simpler rare heritable diseases that were its original focus. One obstacle to the translation of genomic insights from bench to bedside lies in ethical, legal, financial, psycho-social, and cultural landscapes comprising both infrastructure and human dimensions. There are genuine privacy concerns about how to obtain meaningful consent, whether for the sharing of genomic information or the direct involvement of individuals in follow-up research. The latter includes the utility and burden of rapid sharing of clinically actionable information based on genomic risk associations or results from rare causal functional mutations. Furthermore, establishing evidence-based links between genetic variation, disease protection/risk, and appropriate choices of therapeutic strategies is a complex task in which the healthcare profession needs to involve a knowledgeable, empowered public [3, 4].

Rare Diseases and The Need for Precision Therapies

Rare diseases pose a significant challenge due to their heterogeneity and their frequent manifestation in children. It is estimated that approximately 300 million people are affected by one of 6,000 to 8,000 known rare diseases. It is noted that 80% of these diseases have genetic origins. Patients often suffer for many years with symptoms that do not fit any clear diagnostic box, and upon diagnosis are typically offered limited or no intervention beyond supportive and palliative care, reflecting the many gaps in understanding the etiology of these diseases and an absence of precision therapies. There are unmet needs of affected patients who seek a precision diagnosis and targeted therapies. Emerging work on the molecular details of rare diseases has enabled a better understanding of the molecular bases and pathogenesis, and this knowledge can guide therapeutic strategies in rare diseases [5, 6]. Rare diseases may also hold the key for the validation of new therapeutic targets relevant to multifactorial common conditions, among which there has also been a significant reduction in drug discovery rates. Effective therapeutics and the ability to comprehend and predict the future natural history of these diseases may also provide the base knowledge and roadmap for the eventual screening of rare diseases in pre-symptomatic patients. Patients with rare diseases and their families lead lives filled not only with personal challenges and hardships but also with creativity as they work with healthcare providers and research organizations to understand and treat their conditions. As such, rare diseases increasingly feature patient groups and foundations that have leveraged grassroots advocacy and initiatives to establish patient cohorts, and fund or co-fund research, all to move the science and medicine forward in a spirit of collaboration and a “Rising Tide” approach to rare disease therapeutics. This unique feature of many rare diseases offers the potential to build off existing collaborations to foster the development of clinical trials using precision medicine principles [5, 7].

Genomic Technologies and Tools in Precision Medicine

Understanding the underlying genetics of rare diseases is tightly linked to precision medicine. Over the last decades, many strategies and technological advances have brought genomics and other molecular-level approaches to the clinics. Recent technologies have enabled a limitless range of in vitro and in vivo experimental studies, leading to the discovery of new susceptible genes or more efficient screening strategies. Sequencing approaches now enable the analysis of single cells in detail. Bioinformatics now accumulates a vast amount of data on genomics, epigenomics, and transcriptomics, which contribute candidates to experimental studies as well as drug repurposing. In the clinics, individual-level data can be used to categorize common diseases into smaller subgroups, leading to tailored treatment and patient care. 'Omics' information helps to shift the classification of many diseases [8, 9]. At present, genome sequencing is accompanied by several other, more or less high-throughput technologies. One of the important areas of genomic medicine is the identification of disease-causing mutations in rare familial and sporadic cases. Once a mutation is identified in a gene whose function is known, a vast collection of genome editing strategies can be employed. A further important extension of genomic medicine, specifically personalized medicine, is the identification of patients who will likely be responders to a specific intervention. Current technologies in cancer treatment are on the verge of truly personalized medicine. These drugs target living tumor cells at the site, ensuring few side effects. Once the patient leaves the hospital, the drugs block the signaling pathways that tumors coming from these cells depend on. Based on these findings, the next-generation research will include studies that combine early detection with quick screening techniques of the driver mutation and other mutations present in DNA from exosomes that would be predictors of which of the alterations will cause metastasis. Importantly, the novel genomic and clinical tools have to be integrated and used in clinical trials that also take into account the patients' genetics in the recruitment process. Coherent translational biobanks may provide the biological material for such progress [10, 5].

Case Studies and Successes in Precision Therapies for Rare Diseases

An estimated 1 in 17 people will be affected by a rare disease during their lifetimes. The vast majority of these conditions are genetic in origin and often bring myriad complex symptoms that combine to present a serious health burden for affected individuals worldwide. Thanks to advances in genetic technologies, including next-generation sequencing and bioinformatics, we can now better understand the genetic causes of many rare diseases. This knowledge has led to the development of many precision therapies with potential application across a range of previously undertreated conditions. The following case studies, clearly showcasing the personal journeys of one or more patients, have been chosen to illustrate the breadth of rare diseases that genomic medicine now addresses. Each case includes a summary of the genetic problem, the precision therapy devised, and the outcome for the patient. From neurological disorders to inherited bone marrow failure and diabetes, there are many stories of triumph in the rare and genetic disease space. There are willing and able clinicians and researchers devoting their professional lives to 'bringing hope to those for whom previously there was none.' Without their efforts, precision medicine in all its forms will not advance [9, 11].

Challenges And Future Directions in Genomic Medicine for Rare Diseases

However, accessibility still relies on geographical availability or the existence of a well-developed public or private insurance system. Another limitation is that genetic therapies can generate costs that are out of reach even for such well-developed health systems and can eventually generate an escalation in global healthcare costs. The economic impact of new gene therapies is only now starting to be raised in the literature. A comprehensive strategy that ensures accessibility through insurance systems, the setting up of proper priorities in health policies in this area, the development of related knowledge, and the education and training of health professionals are needed for the proper development of public health policies for these drugs. In many health systems, responsibility for the screening and contact of the patient's relatives who could have genetic information that can lead to a particular condition is also not settled yet. States limit themselves to offering individuals genetic information as part of being informed about a specific health condition. The individual right not to know genetic information that could lead to a condition stands, a choice that emerges for an ever-increasing number of participants when enrolling in research studies or genetic services. Related ethical issues have also been discussed in detail. Another consideration is that even when a rare disease is diagnosed through a therapeutic intervention, for many patients the potential loss of genetic privacy from the start, the change in diagnosis, and, as a result, the possible change in the family under the diagnosis itself, and the possible change in the life plan must be taken into account. A last point that must be addressed concerns the need, starting from research and greater knowledge, for a return to the rare disease community—equally represented by patients, researchers, and clinicians—of the many novelties that will arrive in the era of personalized medicine. It is necessary to pay specific attention to people since genomic testing can determine if and when a rare disease diagnosis can be reached. Key points are the way and to whom the information should be provided; who should pass the information: the professionals, not necessarily the geneticists; and the impact of new risk identification or disease prediction approaches on the lives of the subjects. The challenges of genomic medicine concern both rare diseases that require personalized innovative care and the global rare population in terms of diagnostic strategies and social and ethical implications. The development of collaboration between medical stakeholders via the co-construction of knowledge of these new challenges and training of non-expert health professionals in the area of rare diseases, or diseases or new comorbidities that genomic information can predict, is now necessary. Ongoing research will no longer have an individual disease social component but a rarity component. Larger research will be proposed in addition to more focused research on the several complex research questions that are behind these new issues, starting from the development of more precise and less resource-consuming diagnostic tools, and the implementation or modification of facilities to increase the capability to offer diagnosis, prevention, or surveillance to more patients. These policies will also foresee performing several genomic tests for research purposes on volunteers. From a more futuristic perspective, the rare disease community and scientific research are recently developing plans for therapeutic and research international collaborations for problems that are not only rare at the global level but also regionally rare [9, 12].

CONCLUSION

Genomic medicine represents a transformative approach to the management of rare diseases, enabling precise diagnostics and individualized treatments. While advances in genetic technologies and precision therapies have showcased remarkable success in alleviating the burden of previously untreatable conditions, significant challenges remain. These include the ethical, economic, and infrastructural barriers to equitable access, the need for enhanced genomic literacy among healthcare professionals, and the importance of patient empowerment. A collaborative effort involving researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and patient advocacy groups is essential to harness the full potential of genomic medicine. As precision therapies continue to evolve, their integration into healthcare systems promises not only improved patient outcomes for rare diseases but also a roadmap for addressing more complex and multifactorial disorders.

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CITE AS: Obwendo N. J. (2024). Genomic Medicine: Precision Therapies for Rare Diseases. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, 7(2):183-86.