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Review

Residual vascular risk in diabetes – Will the SPPARM alpha concept hold the key?

Jean-Charles Fruchart [a,*], Raul D. Santos [b], Shizuya Yamashita [c,d], Peter Libby [e], on behalf of the International Atherosclerosis Society/R3i Foundation Consensus Panel

[a] R3i Foundation, St. Alban-Anlage 46, Basel, Switzerland
[b] Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein, and Lipid Clinic, Heart Institute (InCor) University of Sao Paulo Medical School Hospital, Sao Paulo, Brazil
[c] Rinku General Medical Center, Izumisano, Osaka, Japan
[d] Departments of Community Medicine and Cardiovascular Medicine, Osaka University Graduate School of Medicine, Suita, Osaka, Japan
[e] Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Blood pressure, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), and glycemia (for microvascular disease) represent the triumvirate of targets for managing vascular risk in type 2 diabetes [1]. Novel treatments that substantially lower LDL-C levels [2,3], or that improve glucose control [4–6], can provide additional vascular risk reduction. Despite these advances in best care, however, an unacceptably high residual cardiovascular risk persists. Therefore, therapeutic interventions aimed at additional targets are needed.

A key contender to address the enigma of residual vascular risk is the nuclear receptor peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha (PPARα). PPARα, which is predominantly expressed in metabolically active tissues, pivotally regulates key metabolic and inflammatory pathways [7,8]. Critical to this role is the ability of PPARα to exert either positive or negative control over the expression of genes involved in fatty acid oxidation, lipoprotein metabolism, and inflammation.

Like other nuclear receptors, activation of PPARα requires binding of an agonist, either endogenous (such as fatty acids) or synthetic, to the ligand binding domain of the receptor. This ligation allows the activated PPARα to form a heterodimer with a partner nuclear receptor, retinoid X receptor (RXR), triggering a conformational change which stabilizes the ligand binding domain. This PPARα-RXR complex then binds to specific DNA sequences in the promoter region (the PPAR receptor response element) of target genes, promoting their expression. The PPARα-RXR complex can also bind to repressor proteins which inhibit the expression of other genes [9,10]. The recruitment of a number of cofactors facilitates both processes, ensuring a 'transcriptionally active' PPAR complex. These cofactors can either activate transcription of target genes (coactivators) or mediate repression of other genes (co-repressors) [11]. To date, 38 cofactors that bind to PPAR have been identified, including those involved in the activation of genes encoding lipoprotein lipase and apolipoprotein (apo) C-III, which regulate triglyceride-rich lipoprotein metabolism, and apo A-I, A-II, and the adenosine triphosphate-binding cassette transporters A1 and G1, involved in high-density lipoprotein (HDL) metabolism. Other cofactors mediate the repression of pro-inflammatory genes, or genes influencing intracellular metabolism and oxidative stress [8,11].

This mode of action of PPARα exerts pleiotropic biological actions likely to benefit the milieu of risk factors in type 2 diabetes [12]. Increases in HDL production, very-low-density lipoprotein (VLDL) clearance and LDL particle size, together with downstream decreases in VLDL production, and LDL particle concentration, illustrate a key role for PPARα agonism in managing atherogenic dyslipidemia (high plasma triglycerides, low HDL cholesterol, small, dense LDL particles, and elevated apo B and C-III), characteristic of type 2 diabetes. Anti-inflammatory effects limit local cellular inflammation and thrombogenesis, pathways linked to cardiovascular complications [12]. Promotion of beta-oxidation and the mitochondrial tricarboxylic acid cycle ameliorate adverse intracellular metabolic changes, including effects on glucose homeostasis [12]. This multimodal pharmacological profile implies that PPARα agonism has the potential to reduce atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (ASCVD) risk in type 2 diabetes.

Clinicians are, however, well aware that current PPARα agonists – fibrates – have proven underwhelming in cardiovascular outcome studies. Their administration has failed to show definitive

* Corresponding author. R3i Foundation, Picassoplatz 8, CH-4010, Basel, Switzerland.
E-mail addresses: jean-Charles.fruchart@r3i.org, jeancharles.fruchart@yahoo.fr (J.-C. Fruchart).

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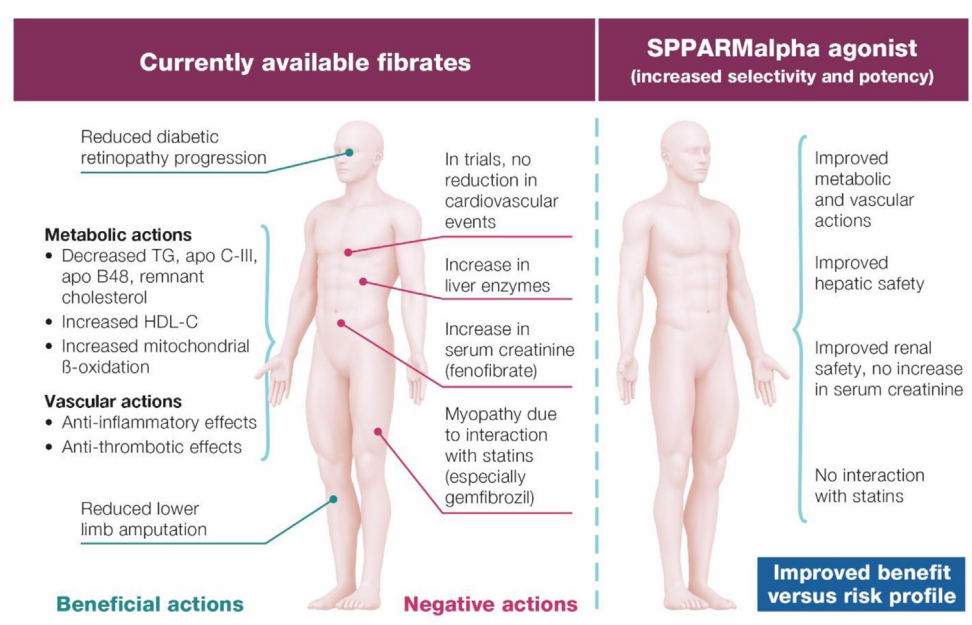

Fig. 1. Schematic illustrating the SPPARMα (Selective Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor Alpha Modulator) concept.
Modulating the unique cofactor recruitment pattern associated with binding of the selective agonist to PPARα provides the opportunity to improve the benefit versus risk profile compared with currently available fibrates.
Abbreviations: apo apolipoprotein; HDL-C high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; TG triglyceridesFigure design by J-C Fruchart.

clinical benefit against a background of best evidence-based treatment including statin therapy [13]. Moreover, classical fibrates can have safety issues such as elevation in serum creatinine, which although reversible [14], raise concerns among practitioners. Certain currently available fibrates interact with other drugs, for example gemfibrozil can cause hazard when combined with statins [15]. Understanding the mode of action of PPARα, however, suggests avenues for the development of novel selective PPARα agonists that might overcome the deficiencies of the fibrates, and also benefit metabolic diseases with an underlying inflammatory component.

Such thinking underlies the SPPARMα (Selective Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor Alpha Modulator) concept, which aims to maximize favourable effects associated with PPARα activation while simultaneously limiting the propensity for unwanted effects [16]. To this end, the large lipid-binding pocket of PPARα provides numerous potential contact points capable of triggering different conformational changes, each potentially associated with a unique cofactor recruitment pattern, and a specific profile of biological effects [17]. Thus, modulating the cofactor recruitment pattern provides the opportunity to improve the benefit versus risk profile of the agonist, in particular overcome issues with renal and hepatic safety (Fig. 1), key deterrents of previous selective PPARα prototypes [18].

The SPPARMα concept provides a highly attractive basis for the development of novel agents that act at multiple targets relevant to vascular risk in cardiometabolic disease. Insights into the role of PPARα in the hepatic inflammatory process may also offer therapeutic potential in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease [19], not only implicated in the development of type 2 diabetes, but also a marker of ASCVD risk. The ultimate question is whether SPPARMα agonism provides a multifaceted solution to the enigma of residual vascular risk in type 2 diabetes; for this we await results from the cardiovascular outcomes study, PROMINENT [20].

Declaration of interests

J-C Fruchart reports personal fees from Kowa Company; RD Santos reports personal fees from Amgen, AstraZeneca, Merck, Akcea, Sanofi/Regeneron, Biolab, Esperion, Kowa, and Novo-Nordisk; S Yamashita reports grants and personal fees from Kowa Company, Ltd., Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Shionogi & Co., Ltd., Bayer Yakuhin, Ltd., MSD K.K., Takeda Pharmaceutical Company, Ltd., Sanwa Kagaku Kenkyusho Co., Ltd., Astellas Pharma Inc., Daiichi-Sankyo Company, Ltd., Astra Zeneka K.K., Kaken Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., grants from Nippon Boehringer Ingelheim Co., Ltd., National Institute of Biomedical Innovation, Kyowa Medex Co., Ltd., Mochida Pharmaceutical Company, Ltd., Hayashibara Co., Ltd., Teijin Pharma Limited and Kissei; and personal fees from Ono Pharmaceutical Company, Ltd., Skylight Biotec, Inc., Pfizer, Astellas Amgen, Sanofi, and Aegerion In addition, M Yamashita has a patent PCT/JP2016/074402 (Assisting Method for the Diagnosis of Type III Hyperlipidemia) pending to Fujirebio & Osaka University, a patent PCT/JP2017/038766 (Method for Selecting Subject Needing Treatment for Dyslipidemia and Reagent for Such Selection) pending to Osaka University & Kyowa Medex Co., Ltd., and a patent PCT/JP2017/038715 (Method for Measuring Oxidized High-Density Lipoprotein) pending to Osaka University & Kyowa Medex Co., Ltd. P Libby reports a research grant from Novartis and honoraria as a scientific advisory board member for Dalcor Pharmaceuticals. He also provides unpaid consultancy for Amgen, AstraZeneca, Ionis Pharmaceuticals, Kowa Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer, Sanofi-Regeneron, XBiotech Inc., Corvidia Therapeutics, IFM Therapeutics, Olatec Therapeutics, Medimmune and Esperion Therapeutics.

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