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Perspective

Biologics And The Changing Landscape Of Pharmacology Education: A Call For Curricular Transformation

Kumara Kaluarachchi

Faculty of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

I N F O

E-mail Id:
kalukuma1@yahoo.co.uk
Orcid Id:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5777-2912

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A B S T R A C T

The emergence of biologics—complex therapeutics derived from living systems—has transformed the pharmaceutical and clinical landscape, challenging the traditional small-molecule-focused paradigm of pharmacology education. This paper examines the scientific, economic, and educational implications of biologics and highlights the widening disconnect between current pharmacology curricula and contemporary therapeutic practices. Drawing on global examples from leading institutions such as Harvard, UCSF, Melbourne, AIIMS, and Kyoto University, we demonstrate how pharmacology education is being reframed through interdisciplinary integration, problem-based learning, and translational science. In contrast, many curricula in developing regions remain stagnant, inadequately preparing graduates for roles in biologics regulation, pharmacovigilance, and molecular therapeutics. We propose a strategic framework for curricular reform that includes integrating molecular sciences, revising departmental nomenclature, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration, and embedding ethical and economic literacy. Addressing these gaps is essential to equipping future pharmacologists and clinicians for the complex challenges of 21st-century medicine.

Keywords: Pharmacology, Curriculum, Biologics

Introduction

Pharmacology has long served as the cornerstone of biomedical science, elucidating drug actions through molecular interactions, dose-response relationships, and physiological integration. Its foundations, grounded in natural product-based medicine and the receptor theory, have evolved over centuries through biochemical and genomic discoveries. [5] However, the rise of biologics—complex macromolecular therapeutics derived from living systems—has disrupted traditional pharmacology's small-molecule-centric teaching and practice.

With biologics now commanding a disproportionately high share of healthcare budgets despite being fewer in number, [4] medical and pharmaceutical education must adapt to reflect this reality. This paper examines how institutions globally are responding to this paradigm shift and offers a blueprint for reforming pharmacology education, particularly in developing regions where curricula remain outdated.

The Scientific Evolution: From Receptors to Biologics

Traditional pharmacology was shaped by the receptor concept, emphasizing dose-response dynamics and small-

molecule pharmacokinetics. [5] Yet, by the late 20th century, advances in genomics, molecular biology, and immunology expanded the pharmacological landscape. Drug development now increasingly targets complex cellular pathways using biologics—monoclonal antibodies, recombinant proteins, and gene therapies—that demand a deeper understanding of cellular signaling, immune regulation, and molecular biology.

Biologics are therapeutic agents derived from living organisms or their components. Unlike conventional small-molecule drugs, which are chemically synthesized and relatively simple in structure, biologics are large, complex molecules—often proteins—that are produced using biotechnology. [4] They include monoclonal antibodies, cytokines, therapeutic enzymes, fusion proteins, and nucleic acid-based treatments such as mRNA and gene therapies. Their specificity and potency enable precise targeting of disease pathways, making them valuable in treating conditions such as autoimmune disorders, cancers, and rare genetic diseases.

Despite their efficacy, biologics present unique challenges: higher costs, limited generic competition, and a need for robust safety monitoring due to immunogenic risks. [1,2] These factors underscore the need for physicians and pharmacologists to be well-versed in molecular pharmacodynamics and biologic safety mechanisms.

Curricular Stagnation amid Scientific Progress

While Western medical schools have restructured their departments—often renaming pharmacology units to reflect broader scopes such as "Molecular and Chemical Pharmacology" (e.g., Harvard Medical School, Stanford, UCSF)—many institutions, especially in South Asia and other developing regions, continue to follow rigid, traditional models.

Experimental pharmacology, once a central feature of medical training, has largely disappeared from undergraduate programs. Moreover, postgraduate curricula often fail to include modules on emerging fields like systems biology, pharmacogenomics, or regulatory science. As a result, graduates are ill-equipped for modern pharmacological careers, many of which now lie in biopharma sectors such as pharmacovigilance, biologic regulation, or translational medicine.

Economic and Educational Implications of Biologics

The high cost of biologics—driven by complex production and limited competition—poses a significant access challenge, especially in low-income regions. Despite comprising only 2–3% of a hospital's formulary, biologics can account for up to 40% of the pharmaceutical expenditure. [4] These economic realities demand that future healthcare professionals understand not only the science behind biologics but also the ethical and economic dimensions of prescribing them.

This educational gap is not merely theoretical. A disconnect between clinical pharmacologists and molecular pharmacologists can compromise decision-making in therapeutic contexts. A physician may prioritize efficacy and compliance, while lacking molecular insights; conversely, a bench scientist may design targeted therapies without understanding patient-centric variables. [3] Bridging this gap requires integrating biologics into pharmacology syllabi and fostering interdisciplinary training.

Reframing Pharmacology Education: Global Trends

In response to these shifts, leading institutions have taken decisive steps:

- Harvard Medical School restructured its pharmacology curriculum under the Department of Biological Chemistry & Molecular Pharmacology (BCMP), which now anchors teaching and research in molecular and structural approaches to receptor biology and signal transduction.
- University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) offers advanced training through its Department of Cellular & Molecular Pharmacology (within the School of Pharmacy) and the Department of Bioengineering & Therapeutic Sciences, both integrating molecular pharmacology with systems biology and computational approaches.
- University of Melbourne Medical School teaches pharmacology through its Department of Pharmacology & Therapeutics, part of the School of Biomedical Sciences. The department employs problem-based learning and research-led coursework in biologics, genetics, and pharmacotherapy.
- Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine has consolidated traditional pharmacology teachings under the Department of Pharmacology & Molecular Sciences (DPMS) and the Division of Clinical Pharmacology, fostering multidisciplinary clusters encompassing bioinformatics and translational research.
- All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, via its Department of Pharmacology, has implemented competency-based curriculum reforms emphasizing case-based learning, simulation, and pharmacovigilance.
- Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine and its Department of Molecular Pharmacology (Graduate School of Pharmaceutical Sciences), along with the Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics Laboratory, train students in pharmacogenomics, drug discovery, and translational therapeutics.

These examples illustrate how pharmacology education must evolve into a dynamic, integrative discipline combining molecular biology, clinical reasoning, and healthcare economics

Recommendations for Curricular Reform

To align with global trends and scientific advances, we propose the following reforms:

- **Curricular Integration**: Merge classical pharmacology with molecular biology, systems pharmacology, and biopharmaceutical sciences.
- **Revised Nomenclature**: Consider renaming departments to reflect expanded scopes (e.g., Department of Molecular and Clinical Pharmacology).
- **Industry-Oriented Modules**: Introduce training in biosimilars, regulatory affairs, pharmacovigilance, and translational research.
- **Interdisciplinary Teaching**: Collaborate with immunology, genomics, and bioengineering departments.
- **Ethical and Economic Literacy**: Educate students on drug pricing, access disparities, and cost-benefit analysis of biologic therapies.

Conclusion

Biologics have irrevocably transformed the therapeutic and academic landscapes of pharmacology. To remain relevant, pharmacology departments must evolve in structure, content, and pedagogy. The inertia in certain regions must be addressed through decisive curricular reforms, guided by international benchmarks and local healthcare realities. Only then can pharmacology fulfill its role in preparing a generation of clinicians and scientists capable of navigating the complexities of 21st-century medicine.

Author Declaration on the Use of AI Tools and Conflict of Interest

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative AI tools to enhance language clarity and readability. All content generated with the assistance of these tools was subsequently reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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