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NEW METHODS OF TREATMENT OF BRAIN AND SPINAL CORD TUMORS

Tukhtanboev Ibrokhimjon
6th Year Student of Andijan State Medical Institute

Abstract:
The treatment of brain and spinal cord tumors has evolved significantly in recent years, driven by advancements in surgical techniques, radiotherapy, drug delivery systems, and immunotherapy. Surgical innovations, including minimally invasive procedures, intraoperative imaging, and functional mapping, have improved the precision of tumor resection, minimizing neurological deficits and enhancing patient outcomes. In parallel, advancements in radiotherapy, such as proton beam therapy and stereotactic radiosurgery, allow for more targeted radiation delivery, reducing collateral damage to surrounding healthy tissue.
Chemotherapy has also seen significant progress with the development of novel drug delivery methods, including nanoparticles and convection-enhanced delivery, which overcome the blood-brain barrier (BBB) to improve the penetration of therapeutic agents into the central nervous system. Moreover, the rise of targeted therapies, such as small molecule inhibitors, and the increasing use of precision medicine, informed by genetic and molecular tumor profiling, have enabled more personalized treatment strategies.
Immunotherapy, through immune checkpoint inhibitors and CAR T-cell therapies, represents a promising therapeutic modality, enhancing the body's immune response against tumor cells. Molecular profiling and genetic sequencing further facilitate the identification of specific tumor mutations, guiding the selection of tailored treatment regimens. Despite these advancements, challenges remain, including tumor heterogeneity, resistance mechanisms, and the difficulty of effective drug delivery to the central nervous system.
This review highlights the significant progress made in the treatment of brain and spinal cord tumors and outlines emerging approaches that offer promise for improving patient survival and quality of life. Continued research into tumor biology, drug delivery, and combinatorial therapies is essential to address the remaining clinical challenges and enhance the therapeutic landscape for these complex and devastating diseases.

Keywords: Brain tumors, spinal cord tumors, neurosurgery, minimally invasive surgery, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, gene therapy, chemotherapy, precision medicine, radiotherapy, proton beam therapy, stereotactic radiosurgery, nanoparticle drug delivery, blood-brain barrier, convection-enhanced delivery, small molecule inhibitors, molecular profiling, genetic sequencing, CAR T-cell therapy, tumor microenvironment, immuno-oncology, personalized treatment, tumor heterogeneity, cancer resistance mechanisms, tumor biomarkers, advanced radiotherapy, artificial intelligence in oncology, tumor resection precision, gene-editing technologies, experimental therapies.

Introduction

Tumors of the brain and spinal cord are among the most complex and challenging conditions in modern medicine. They encompass a wide range of neoplasms, varying in histological type, location, and behavior, and present unique therapeutic challenges due to their proximity to critical neural structures. Despite advancements in surgical techniques, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy, the prognosis for many patients remains suboptimal, particularly for high-grade gliomas and metastatic spinal tumors.

Recent decades have seen significant progress in understanding the molecular and genetic underpinnings of central nervous system (CNS) tumors, leading to the development of innovative treatment modalities. These include targeted therapies, immunotherapy, gene therapy, and advanced neurosurgical techniques. The advent of precision medicine has shifted the paradigm from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to treatments tailored to the individual genetic and molecular profiles of tumors.

In addition to pharmacological advances, non-invasive and minimally invasive techniques, such as stereotactic radiosurgery and laser interstitial thermal therapy (LITT), have expanded treatment options. Furthermore, advances in neuroimaging and intraoperative technologies, such as fluorescence-guided surgery and neuronavigation, have improved surgical outcomes by enabling precise tumor localization and resection.

This introduction provides an overview of emerging methods for treating brain and spinal cord tumors, focusing on their underlying principles, current applications, and potential to improve patient outcomes. By integrating insights from molecular biology, immunology, and bioengineering, these methods offer renewed hope for individuals facing these life-altering conditions.

Molecular Targeted Therapy: Molecular targeted therapy represents a breakthrough in cancer treatment by focusing on the specific molecular abnormalities driving tumor growth, rather than just treating the symptoms or general tumor characteristics. Unlike traditional chemotherapy, which targets rapidly dividing cells indiscriminately, molecular targeted therapies aim to disrupt the molecular pathways that are crucial for the tumor's survival and proliferation. This specificity can lead to more effective treatment while reducing damage to normal healthy tissues, resulting in fewer side effects.

Key Molecular Targets in Brain and Spinal Cord Tumors - advances in molecular biology and genomics have identified several key molecular targets in brain and spinal cord tumors. These targets are specific genes, proteins, or pathways that drive tumor growth, survival, and resistance to therapy. Understanding these targets has paved the way for the development of novel, more precise treatments. Below are some of the most critical molecular targets:

1) **Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR):**
   - **EGFR** is a transmembrane protein that, when activated, triggers a cascade of signaling pathways involved in cell division, survival, and migration. EGFR is frequently overexpressed or mutated in brain tumors such as glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), a highly aggressive form of glioma.

- The most common mutation of EGFR in glioblastoma is **EGFRvIII**, which causes constitutive activation of the receptor, leading to uncontrolled cell growth.
- **EGFR inhibitors** such as **gefitinib**, **erlotinib**, and **afatinib** are designed to block EGFR signaling, preventing the tumor from growing. Although these inhibitors have shown promise in clinical trials, their effectiveness in glioblastoma is limited due to the complex molecular mechanisms and compensatory signaling pathways within the tumor.

2) **BRAF Mutations:**

- The **BRAF** gene encodes a protein that plays a crucial role in the MAPK/ERK signaling pathway, which regulates cell growth and differentiation. Mutations in BRAF, especially **V600E**, result in the continuous activation of this pathway, promoting tumorigenesis.
- **BRAF inhibitors** like **vemurafenib** and **dabrafenib** have been used in the treatment of melanomas and are now being explored for treating BRAF-mutant gliomas. These inhibitors work by blocking the BRAF protein's activity, slowing down the tumor growth. However, they often require combination therapies to overcome resistance mechanisms that develop within the tumor.

3) **Isocitrate Dehydrogenase (IDH) Mutations:**

- **IDH1** and **IDH2** are enzymes involved in cellular metabolism, and mutations in these genes are common in low-grade gliomas and secondary glioblastomas. The mutant forms of IDH produce an abnormal metabolite called **2-hydroxyglutarate (2-HG)**, which contributes to tumor growth and malignancy by altering the epigenetic landscape of cells.
- Targeting these mutations with specific **IDH inhibitors** such as **ivosidenib** and **AG-881** has shown promise in preclinical studies and early-phase clinical trials. These inhibitors aim to reduce the production of 2-HG, thereby reversing some of the epigenetic changes that contribute to tumor progression. Clinical trials are ongoing to assess the full potential of these therapies in treating IDH-mutant gliomas.

4) **PI3K/AKT/mTOR Pathway:**

- The **PI3K/AKT/mTOR** pathway is another critical signaling pathway involved in the growth and survival of many brain tumors, including glioblastomas and medulloblastomas. Mutations or amplifications in components of this pathway lead to uncontrolled cellular proliferation and resistance to apoptosis (programmed cell death).
- Targeting this pathway with **PI3K inhibitors** like **buparlisib**, **AKT inhibitors** such as **ipatasertib**, and **mTOR inhibitors** like **everolimus** has shown potential in preclinical models and early-phase trials. By inhibiting this pathway, these drugs aim to block tumor cell survival mechanisms and promote cell death. However, clinical efficacy and resistance issues need to be further explored.

5) **Angiogenesis Inhibitors:**

- Tumors require a constant supply of oxygen and nutrients to grow, which they obtain by inducing the formation of new blood vessels through a process called **angiogenesis**. Vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) is one of the key regulators of angiogenesis and is often overexpressed in brain tumors.

- **Anti-VEGF therapies**, such as **bevacizumab** (Avastin), work by neutralizing VEGF, thereby inhibiting the growth of new blood vessels that supply the tumor. Bevacizumab has been approved for the treatment of recurrent glioblastoma, showing promise in prolonging progression-free survival. However, resistance to anti-VEGF therapies can occur, and their role in overall survival remains debated.

Molecular targeted therapies generally work through several mechanisms:

- **Inhibition of Oncogene Activity**: By blocking key proteins or receptors involved in tumor growth (e.g., EGFR or BRAF), these therapies stop the tumor from receiving the signals it needs to grow and divide.
- **Disruption of Tumor Metabolism**: Mutations like those in IDH enzymes can be targeted to reverse abnormal metabolic pathways that fuel tumor growth.
- **Inhibition of Angiogenesis**: By blocking the formation of blood vessels, these therapies deprive the tumor of the nutrients and oxygen it needs to grow.
- **Restoring Tumor Suppressor Gene Function**: Some therapies aim to restore the activity of tumor suppressor genes, which are often inactivated in brain tumors.

Clinical Application and Challenges:

- **Personalized Medicine**: One of the main advantages of molecular targeted therapies is that they can be tailored to the genetic profile of individual tumors. Genetic testing of tumor biopsies allows for the identification of specific mutations and the selection of appropriate targeted therapies.
- **Combination Therapies**: Given that tumors can quickly adapt and develop resistance to a single therapy, combination treatments—such as pairing molecular targeted therapies with traditional radiation, chemotherapy, or immunotherapy—are often explored in clinical trials to enhance efficacy and delay resistance.
- **Blood-Brain Barrier (BBB) Challenges**: The BBB is a major obstacle in delivering molecular therapies to the brain, as it limits the penetration of many drugs. Researchers are exploring strategies to bypass the BBB, including the use of nanoparticles, intrathecal (directly into the cerebrospinal fluid) drug delivery, and focused ultrasound to temporarily disrupt the barrier.
- **Tumor Heterogeneity**: Brain and spinal cord tumors, especially gliomas, exhibit significant genetic heterogeneity, which can make it difficult to target all of the tumor cells effectively with a single therapy. This complexity underscores the need for personalized, multi-modal treatment strategies.

Molecular targeted therapies offer a highly promising and increasingly viable treatment option for brain and spinal cord tumors. By specifically targeting the molecular drivers of tumor growth, these therapies provide the potential for more effective treatments with fewer side effects compared to traditional approaches. However, challenges such as the blood-brain barrier, tumor resistance, and the need for personalized treatment plans must be addressed. Ongoing research and clinical trials continue to refine these therapies, and

their integration into standard care is anticipated to improve outcomes for patients with these complex and often deadly tumors.

Immunotherapy: Immunotherapy is rapidly transforming cancer treatment by using the body's immune system to target and destroy cancer cells. The blood-brain barrier (BBB) has historically been a significant obstacle in delivering effective immune-based treatments to brain tumors, but recent innovations have sought to address this challenge.

- **Checkpoint Inhibitors:** The use of checkpoint inhibitors such as **nivolumab** (anti-PD-1) and **pembrolizumab** (anti-PD-L1) has shown promise in brain cancer. Tumors often express immune checkpoint proteins that suppress immune cell function, preventing an effective immune response. By blocking these checkpoint pathways, these therapies enable T cells to better recognize and attack the tumor. However, their efficacy in glioblastomas is still being investigated, as the tumor microenvironment in the brain is highly immunosuppressive.
- **CAR-T Cell Therapy:** Chimeric Antigen Receptor T-cell therapy (CAR-T) involves modifying a patient's T cells to express receptors specific to tumor antigens. Once infused back into the patient, these modified T cells can specifically recognize and attack tumor cells. CAR-T therapies targeting **EGFRvIII** and **IL13Ra2** are being explored for glioblastoma treatment, with promising early results, though their ability to overcome the BBB remains a challenge.
- **Oncolytic Virus Therapy:** This innovative approach uses engineered viruses that selectively infect and kill tumor cells while sparing normal tissue. **Toca 511** is one such oncolytic virus currently undergoing clinical trials, and it has demonstrated potential in treating glioblastomas by also activating the immune system against the tumor.

Although immunotherapy shows tremendous promise, there are concerns regarding its safety, efficacy, and challenges in overcoming the blood-brain barrier and the immunosuppressive tumor microenvironment. However, breakthroughs in these areas are expected in the coming years.

Minimally Invasive Surgery: Surgical resection is often the first step in treating brain and spinal cord tumors. Traditional open surgeries, although effective, can cause significant morbidity due to the need for large incisions and the risks associated with manipulating delicate neural structures. Minimally invasive surgical techniques aim to reduce these risks and improve recovery times.

- **Endoscopic Surgery:** Endoscopy allows surgeons to remove tumors through small incisions, using a camera and specialized instruments to view the tumor and surrounding structures. This approach is especially beneficial for tumors located in hard-to-reach areas of the brain or spinal cord, such as the pituitary gland or brainstem. Endoscopic techniques offer quicker recovery, less postoperative pain, and reduced risk of infection compared to traditional open surgeries.
- **Laser Interstitial Thermal Therapy (LITT):** LITT is a minimally invasive procedure that uses focused laser beams to heat and destroy tumor tissue. The procedure is guided

by MRI to ensure precision, and it is particularly useful for treating deep-seated tumors or tumors in regions difficult to access surgically. LITT has demonstrated efficacy in managing gliomas, metastatic brain tumors, and certain spinal cord tumors.

- **Robotic-Assisted Surgery:** Robotic systems such as **CyberKnife** and **ROSA** have revolutionized neurosurgery. These systems allow for higher precision in tumor resection by using robotic arms and advanced imaging systems to guide surgeons. This improves tumor removal accuracy and reduces the risk of damaging surrounding healthy brain tissue. These systems are particularly useful in treating tumors that are located close to critical areas like the motor cortex.

Minimally invasive surgical techniques continue to improve and have the potential to enhance the outcomes of brain and spinal cord tumor surgeries, offering patients faster recovery and fewer complications.

Gene Therapy: Gene therapy for brain and spinal cord tumors is still in its infancy but holds tremendous potential for treating genetically driven cancers. The idea behind gene therapy is to correct or modify the genetic material inside tumor cells, either by replacing mutated genes or by introducing new genetic material to directly combat the tumor.

- **CRISPR-Cas9 and Gene Editing: CRISPR-Cas9** is a gene-editing technology that allows precise alterations to be made to the DNA of living cells. This tool has been used experimentally to target and correct genetic mutations responsible for tumor growth. For example, targeting mutations in the **p53 tumor suppressor gene** could reactivate its function and induce cell death in tumor cells.
- **Oncolytic Virotherapy:** Oncolytic viruses, modified to specifically infect and kill tumor cells, have been combined with gene therapy strategies. Researchers are exploring the introduction of genes that trigger cell death pathways within these viruses, making them even more effective in killing tumor cells. These therapies have the potential to also stimulate the immune system to recognize and target tumor cells more efficiently.

While gene therapy for CNS tumors is not yet widely available, ongoing research is exploring its potential to offer highly personalized and effective treatments.

Advances in Radiation Therapy: Radiation therapy is a cornerstone in the management of brain and spinal cord tumors, especially for tumors that are not amenable to surgery. Recent technological advances have significantly improved the precision of radiation delivery, reducing side effects and improving treatment outcomes.

- **Proton Beam Therapy:** Unlike conventional X-ray radiation, proton therapy uses protons to deliver targeted doses of radiation to tumors. Proton beams have physical properties that allow them to deposit most of their energy directly within the tumor, limiting the radiation exposure to surrounding healthy tissue. This precision is especially beneficial in pediatric brain tumors and tumors located near critical structures.
- **Stereotactic Radiosurgery (SRS):** Stereotactic radiosurgery involves the use of focused, high-dose radiation to treat small to medium-sized tumors with exceptional precision. This technique is especially useful for tumors that are inoperable or located in regions difficult to

access surgically. SRS can be used to treat gliomas, meningiomas, and metastases with minimal damage to surrounding healthy tissue.

- **Brachytherapy:** This technique involves implanting radioactive sources directly into or near the tumor site. While not as widely used as external beam radiation, brachytherapy can be particularly effective for tumors that are localized and difficult to treat with external radiation.

These advancements in radiation therapy are paving the way for more effective treatments with fewer side effects, leading to better patient outcomes.

Conclusion

The treatment landscape for brain and spinal cord tumors has experienced remarkable transformation due to the integration of cutting-edge technologies and therapies. Surgical advancements, such as neuronavigation systems and intraoperative functional mapping, have significantly enhanced tumor resection precision, minimizing the risk of neurological deficits and improving the long-term quality of life for patients. These approaches, when combined with intraoperative MRI and real-time monitoring, allow for the complete removal of tumors in challenging locations, previously deemed inoperable.

Chemotherapy, while traditionally a cornerstone of tumor treatment, has seen innovations in the form of novel drug delivery systems. The development of nanoparticles, liposomes, and convection-enhanced delivery systems has addressed the challenge of the blood-brain barrier (BBB), improving drug penetration into the central nervous system. This advancement has led to higher local drug concentrations, potentially increasing treatment efficacy while reducing systemic toxicity. Additionally, the rise of small molecule inhibitors and targeted therapies that specifically address molecular pathways involved in tumor progression offers a more tailored and effective treatment strategy for specific tumor types.

Immunotherapy has also emerged as a revolutionary treatment modality, particularly with the advent of immune checkpoint inhibitors and CAR T-cell therapies. These therapies harness the body's immune system to target and destroy tumor cells, overcoming some of the limitations of conventional treatments. The use of vaccines targeting specific tumor antigens, as well as monoclonal antibodies that block immune checkpoint proteins like PD-1/PD-L1, has shown promise in enhancing immune responses against central nervous system tumors.

The role of precision medicine has been increasingly pivotal in advancing the treatment of brain and spinal cord tumors. Molecular profiling and genetic sequencing of tumor biopsies allow clinicians to identify specific genetic mutations, alterations, and biomarkers that can guide treatment selection. For example, identifying mutations in genes such as IDH1, MGMT promoter methylation, or EGFR can direct targeted therapies, leading to more personalized and effective treatment regimens. This tailored approach not only improves treatment efficacy but also helps minimize side effects by selecting the most appropriate therapies for each patient.

In addition to these treatment innovations, the growing understanding of tumor microenvironments and their role in tumor progression is shaping future therapeutic strategies. For instance, understanding how tumor cells interact with surrounding brain tissue, the

vasculature, and immune cells is opening avenues for new therapies that disrupt these interactions to limit tumor growth and spread. The emergence of combinatorial therapies, where immunotherapies, targeted therapies, and radiation treatments are used in conjunction, holds the potential to further increase treatment efficacy and overcome resistance mechanisms.

However, despite these significant advances, challenges remain in the clinical management of brain and spinal cord tumors. Tumor heterogeneity, the capacity of tumors to adapt and develop resistance to treatment, and the difficulty of delivering large therapeutic doses across the BBB are ongoing hurdles. Moreover, the complexity of central nervous system tumors, particularly gliomas and metastatic brain tumors, requires continuous research into novel biomarkers, therapeutic agents, and improved drug delivery methods.

Future research in neuro-oncology is likely to focus on understanding the genetic, epigenetic, and environmental factors that drive tumorigenesis in the central nervous system. The application of artificial intelligence and machine learning in both tumor diagnosis and treatment planning promises to further refine personalized treatment approaches. Additionally, the exploration of gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR could offer innovative avenues for direct genetic correction of tumor-promoting mutations.

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in the development of new treatment modalities for brain and spinal cord tumors, the complexity of these diseases necessitates continued innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration. With sustained research efforts, the integration of molecular medicine, immunotherapy, and advanced technology will likely yield new therapeutic approaches that improve both survival rates and the quality of life for patients suffering from these challenging and often devastating conditions.

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