Journal of Advances in Drug Research

ISSN: 2230-7761
www.jadr.co.in

Volume 17, Issue 05 | Received 01.10.2026 | Accepted 03.10.2026 | Online 07.10.2026

TARGETED PROTEIN DEGRADATION USING PROTAC TECHNOLOGY: OPPORTUNITIES IN MODERN DRUG DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Background:Proteolysis-targeting chimeras (PROTACs) redirect the ubiquitin–proteasome system to eliminate selected disease-associated proteins, providing an event-driven alternative to sustained target inhibition. Objective: To critically assess the molecular rationale, preclinical achievements, clinical evidence and development barriers of PROTAC technology. Methods: A structured narrative synthesis of 15 international peer-reviewed publications (2001–2025) was performed using PubMed records and journal-publisher sources. Evidence was categorized by mechanism, molecular optimization, translational application and study maturity; no original experiments or pooled meta-analysis were conducted. Results: Cooperative ternary-complex formation and E3 ligase recruitment determine degradation potency and selectivity. Preclinical work established degradation of BRD4 and STAT3, whereas early clinical studies demonstrated target engagement for IRAK4 and BTK degraders. In the phase III VERITAC-2 trial, vepdegestrant improved median progression-free survival among patients with ESR1-mutated advanced breast cancer (5.0 versus 2.1 months; hazard ratio 0.58), but the difference was not statistically significant in the overall randomized population. Conclusion: PROTACs offer a credible drug-development strategy for selected intracellular targets; oral exposure, tissue selectivity, resistance and comparative patient benefit remain key validation priorities.

KEYWORDS. PROTAC; targeted protein degradation; ubiquitin–proteasome system; E3 ubiquitin ligase; ternary complex; medicinal chemistry; clinical translation.

INTRODUCTION

Conventional drug discovery has predominantly depended on molecules that occupy and inhibit the active sites of enzymes or receptors. Occupancy-driven agents may fail against proteins lacking druggable pockets, with essential scaffold functions or inhibitor-resistance mutations. Targeted protein degradation offers a conceptually different intervention: removing the protein itself rather than continuously blocking a single molecular function. The first proteolysis-targeting chimera was described by Sakamoto and colleagues in 2001, providing experimental evidence that a synthetic bifunctional compound could recruit a protein to a ubiquitin ligase for degradation (1).

A modern PROTAC typically comprises a ligand for the protein of interest (POI), a linker and a ligand for an E3 ubiquitin ligase. The compound brings the two proteins into proximity, enabling ubiquitin transfer and subsequent clearance of the POI by the 26S proteasome. Unlike a conventional inhibitor, the degrader may be released after its target is

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destroyed and can potentially engage additional target molecules. Event-driven effects may outlast exposure, but PROTAC recycling is not universal (2, 8).

Medicinal-chemistry advances enabled the transition from peptide-based proof-of-concept molecules to cell-permeable small-molecule degraders. Investigations of bromodomain-containing protein 4 (BRD4) demonstrated that recruiting cereblon or von Hippel–Lindau (VHL) E3 ligase complexes can produce robust intracellular depletion, while structural studies established that favorable protein–protein contacts within a ternary complex can improve target selectivity (3–6). Recent reviews highlight growing clinical interest and pharmacokinetic barriers (8, 9, 12–14).

The objective of this article is to examine the pharmacological opportunities and limitations of PROTAC technology for modern drug development. Specific aims are to summarize the molecular basis of targeted degradation, identify practical determinants of degrader performance, distinguish preclinical evidence from human trial findings, and outline priorities for rational design and clinical validation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design. A structured narrative review was undertaken to synthesize representative mechanistic, medicinal-chemistry and translational evidence. The synthesis covers 15 peer-reviewed international articles published from 2001 to 2025. Sources were identified through PubMed and major journal publishers. Information was checked against the published reports or their bibliographic abstracts, with particular attention to study design and numerical clinical outcomes.

Search and selection framework. Searches used combinations of “proteolysis-targeting chimera”, “PROTAC”, “targeted protein degradation”, “E3 ligase”, “ternary complex”, “clinical trial”, “BRD4”, “STAT3”, “BTK”, “IRAK4”, and “vepdegestrant”. Seminal experimental studies were retained to establish causality and molecular mechanism; later reviews were used to contextualize field-wide advances; clinical or translational reports were prioritized when they provided directly interpretable pharmacodynamic or patient-level evidence. The final set was intentionally selective, not exhaustive, and no PRISMA flow or formal systematic-review claim is made.

Data synthesis. Extracted domains included target protein, recruited E3 system where reported, therapeutic application, experimental context, degradation readouts, human efficacy endpoints and study limitations. Evidence was assessed descriptively by stage (biochemical/cellular, animal, early-phase clinical or randomized phase III). Comparative statistics were reproduced only where explicitly reported in the original trial. No newly recruited patients, laboratory experiments, pooled effect estimates or simulated research results form part of this article.

RESULTS

3.1. Mechanistic basis of PROTAC-mediated degradation

PROTAC activity requires a sequence of mechanistic events: cellular uptake, simultaneous engagement of a target and E3 ligase, formation of a productive ternary complex, transfer of ubiquitin to accessible lysine residues, and proteasomal elimination of

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the tagged protein. Cereblon (CRBN) and VHL are established ligase-recruitment platforms, but success depends on the geometry and kinetics of the induced complex rather than on binary ligand affinity alone. The structure of a BRD4–MZ1–VHL complex demonstrated that newly induced interprotein contacts can provide cooperativity and selectivity beyond that predicted from either warhead individually (5, 6).

The degrader redirects endogenous machinery; its catalytic-like behavior depends on productive recycling, E3 abundance, target turnover and proteasome integrity. High doses may favor unproductive binary complexes rather than productive ternary association, producing a characteristic concentration-dependent "hook effect". Accordingly, loss of protein abundance must be verified directly and should not be inferred from a downstream signaling assay alone (2, 8, 12).

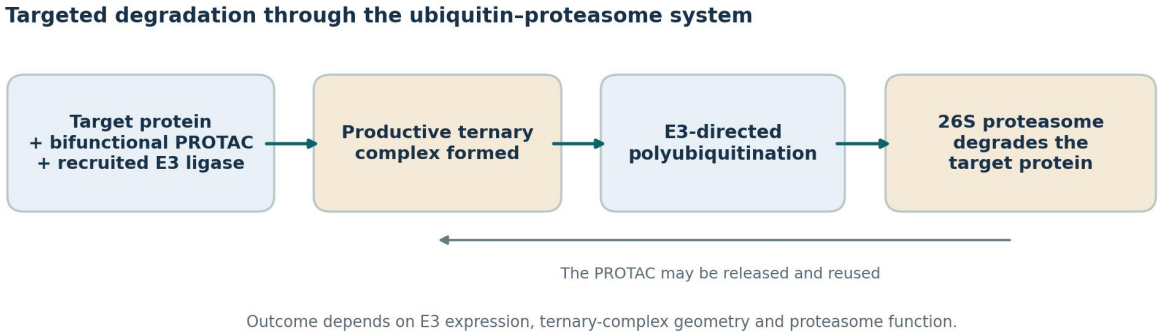


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway of PROTAC-driven protein degradation (author-created schematic based on (1, 2, 5, 8)).

3.2. Molecular design and pharmacological optimization

Molecular design must balance three linked constraints: affinity for the POI, recruitment of an appropriate E3 ligase, and a linker architecture that permits favorable three-dimensional orientation. Increasing ligand potency does not necessarily increase cellular degradation because cooperativity, intracellular exposure and the kinetics of complex formation also matter. Changes in linker attachment point, length, flexibility or stereochemistry can alter both degradation efficiency and the set of proteins affected (5, 6). Compared with many conventional small molecules, PROTACs often have higher molecular weights and polarity; oral absorption, solubility, permeability, efflux and metabolic stability therefore require dedicated optimization (8, 13, 14).

Table 1. Critical determinants and assessment methods in PROTAC optimization.

Design variable	Mechanistic significance	Suggested readout
POI binding	Target recognition without necessarily blocking catalytic activity.	Biochemical binding; cellular engagement.
E3 ligase recruitment	Provides the ubiquitination machinery and shapes tissue	Ligase binding; expression and knockout controls.

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Design variable	Mechanistic significance	Suggested readout
	suitability.	
Ternary cooperativity	Determines productive POI–PROTAC–E3 geometry.	Ternary-complex assay; structural study.
Linker and physicochemistry	Controls geometry, permeability and exposure.	Degradation curves; solubility; cellular PK.
Functional selectivity	Differentiates on-target depletion from unwanted protein losses.	Quantitative proteomics; Dmax and DC50.

The most useful degradation metrics are DC50, the concentration producing 50% of the maximal observed degradation, and Dmax, the maximum reduction in protein abundance under defined assay conditions. These values should be reported together with exposure time, cell type and target-recovery kinetics. Orthogonal confirmation—such as immunoblotting plus targeted or global proteomics—is required to distinguish true target destruction from changes in antibody recognition, protein synthesis or cell viability. Proteasome inhibition, E3-ligase inactivation and suitable inactive analogues can further strengthen mechanistic attribution (2, 6, 12).

3.3. Evidence from experimental and translational studies

BRD4 degraders illustrate the first major drug-discovery opportunity. The CRBN-recruiting approach and the VHL-recruiting MZ1 series demonstrated that proteins implicated in oncogenic transcription could be removed from cells using chemically tractable molecules (3, 4). Structural work subsequently explained why a PROTAC may degrade one family member more effectively than closely related proteins even when the binding ligand itself is not comparably selective (5, 6). These experiments established a generalizable design principle, not a guarantee of clinical efficacy for BRD4 inhibition or degradation.

The STAT3-targeting degrader SD-36 provided a distinct proof of concept for a transcription factor that has historically been difficult to modulate pharmacologically. In cell systems and mouse xenografts, SD-36 produced selective STAT3 depletion and sustained antitumor effects. Importantly, the reported complete tumor regressions were observed in preclinical models and must not be described as outcomes in treated patients (7). More recently, NX-2127 was shown to degrade kinase-impaired and inhibitor-resistant BTK variants, supporting the possibility that removal of the protein can suppress both catalytic and noncatalytic scaffold functions (11).

3.4. Human evidence and clinically relevant outcomes

An oral IRAK4 degrader, KT-474 (SAR444656), was studied in a phase I trial involving healthy volunteers and patients with hidradenitis suppurativa or atopic dermatitis. Published results provide human proof of mechanistic target modulation and preliminary tolerability observations. Because the disease cohorts were small and early-phase, these

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findings should be interpreted as pharmacodynamic feasibility rather than evidence of definitive comparative clinical benefit (10).

The clinical-stage BTK degrader NX-2127 was studied in relapsed or refractory B-cell malignancies. A translational analysis incorporating early clinical observations documented greater than 80% BTK reduction in circulating cells and indicated activity against resistance-associated BTK variants. The reported interim CLL analysis included 23 enrolled patients, with 14 evaluable for tumor-lesion assessment, and was nonprespecified; consequently, its exploratory signals cannot replace a randomized efficacy evaluation (11).

The most mature comparative evidence in the selected literature is the phase III VERITAC-2 study. Among 624 patients with estrogen receptor (ER)-positive, HER2-negative advanced breast cancer, 313 received the oral ER degrader vepdegestrant and 311 received fulvestrant. In the prespecified ESR1-mutated subgroup (n = 270), median progression-free survival was 5.0 versus 2.1 months (hazard ratio 0.58; 95% CI 0.43–0.78; $p < 0.001$). Across the entire randomized population, median progression-free survival was 3.8 versus 3.6 months (hazard ratio 0.83; 95% CI 0.69–1.01; $p = 0.07$). Grade ≥3 adverse events occurred in 23.4% and 17.6%, respectively. This shows genotype-specific clinical benefit, not a statistically significant advantage in the full population (15).

Table 2. Representative PROTAC programmes and hierarchy of published evidence.

Example / target	Study level	Key reported finding
MZ1 / BRD4	Cellular and structural	Ternary cooperativity and selective BRD4 degradation (4–6).
SD-36 / STAT3	Cell and mouse models	Tumor regression in xenografts; no patient-efficacy result (7).
KT-474 / IRAK4	Phase I human study	Human pharmacodynamic activity; clinical efficacy remains exploratory (10).
NX-2127 / BTK	Mechanistic + phase I interim	Degradation of mutant BTK in cells and >80% patient BTK reduction (11).
Vepdegestrant / ER	Randomized phase III	ESR1-mutated subgroup PFS benefit; not significant overall (15).

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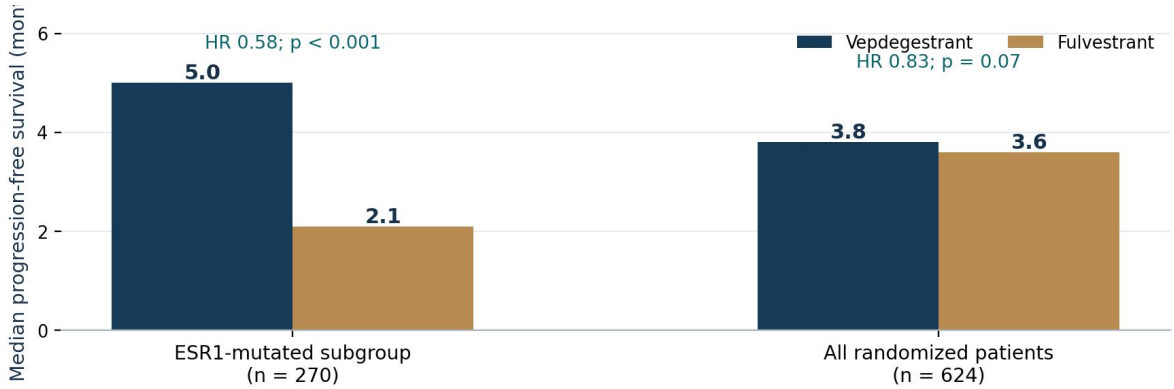


Figure 2. Published median progression-free survival in VERITAC-2; two distinct analysis populations, not pooled estimates. Data reproduced from Campone et al. (15).

DISCUSSION

The combined evidence indicates that PROTAC technology can extend drug discovery from inhibiting one molecular activity to eliminating a disease-associated protein and, where biologically relevant, all of its associated functions. This is potentially valuable for scaffold proteins, nonenzymatic regulators and proteins that are difficult to suppress through conventional occupancy-based binding. At the same time, a nominally "undruggable" target is not automatically degradable: a cell-accessible target ligand, favorable surface orientation, compatible E3 ligase and sufficient intracellular exposure remain necessary. Mechanistic diversity between POIs partly explains why optimization rules do not transfer reliably from one degrader series to another (8, 12, 14).

Clinical evidence also reveals the need for biomarker-guided development. In VERITAC-2, the treatment effect differed between the ESR1-mutated subgroup and the overall trial population, supporting mutation-defined stratification and careful prespecification of primary endpoints (15). Early-phase studies of IRAK4 and BTK degraders demonstrate that target depletion can be measured in humans; however, pharmacodynamic success should not be equated with durable symptom improvement, tumor control or superior survival. Randomized trials, exposure–response analyses and safety follow-up are indispensable to determine whether mechanistic advantages translate into meaningful clinical outcomes (9–11).

Limitations include variable oral exposure and tissue penetration, tissue-specific E3 expression, off-target degradation and acquired resistance. Disease models with variable E3 expression require validated proteomics, genetic rescue experiments and repeat-dose pharmacology. In addition, eliminating an essential protein can produce broader biology than inhibiting a single active site, requiring careful therapeutic-window assessment. Recent field-wide evaluations consistently identify selectivity, drug-like properties and patient-specific responses as major challenges (12–14).

A rational translational framework therefore starts with mechanistic target validation, uses orthogonal degradation and ubiquitination assays, tests dependence on a defined E3 ligase, evaluates proteome-wide selectivity, optimizes pharmacokinetic exposure, and progresses through disease-relevant in vivo models before carefully designed patient

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studies. Cross-study quantitative comparisons are inappropriate here because molecular targets, assay durations, clinical populations and efficacy endpoints differ. This narrative review is non-exhaustive and offers neither formal bias assessment nor pooled efficacy estimates.

CONCLUSION

PROTACs represent a scientifically established and clinically advancing strategy for targeted elimination of intracellular proteins. Foundational work demonstrated E3-mediated degradation, while structural studies established the role of productive ternary-complex formation in potency and selectivity. Preclinical success with BRD4 and STAT3 and human target-engagement evidence for IRAK4 and BTK support pharmacological feasibility. Randomized phase III data for vepdegestrant demonstrate clinically relevant benefit in an ESR1-mutated subgroup while highlighting the limits of extrapolation to unselected patients. The next phase of PROTAC drug development should prioritize drug-like molecular properties, tissue-specific E3 biology, validated predictive biomarkers, resistance surveillance and rigorous comparative trials. Overall, the modality should be regarded as a complementary therapeutic platform whose clinical value must be established separately for each protein and patient population (8, 12–15).

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