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PHARMACOLOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR OPTIMIZING ANTIBIOTIC THERAPY IN THE ERA OF ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE: INTEGRATING PHARMACOKINETICS, PHARMACODYNAMICS, AND ANTIMICROBIAL STEWARDSHIP

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Abstract

Background. Antimicrobial resistance is a major challenge to contemporary clinical medicine and threatens the effectiveness of antibacterial therapy across multiple fields, including intensive care, surgery, oncology, transplantation, and neonatology. Inappropriate prescribing, excessive use of broad-spectrum antibiotics, inadequate dosing, unnecessarily prolonged treatment, and insufficient use of microbiological diagnostics contribute to the selection and spread of resistant microorganisms.

Objective. The aim of this review was to analyze the principal pharmacological strategies for optimizing antibiotic therapy under conditions of increasing antimicrobial resistance, with particular emphasis on pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic principles, microbiological guidance, de-escalation, the WHO AWaRe framework, and antimicrobial stewardship.

Materials and Methods. A narrative analytical review was conducted using recommendations of the World Health Organization, the WHO AWaRe Antibiotic Book, guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and relevant pharmacological and clinical literature. The analysis focused on antibiotic selection, pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic targets, route of administration, dose individualization, microbiological diagnostics, adverse effects, duration of treatment, reassessment of therapy, and stewardship interventions.

Results. Rational antibiotic therapy requires integration of pathogen-related, drug-related, and patient-related factors. The probability of bacterial infection, site of infection, expected pathogens, local resistance patterns, antimicrobial susceptibility, tissue penetration, renal and hepatic function, drug interactions, adverse effects, and pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic targets should all be considered. Early empirical therapy may be necessary in severe infection, but it should be reassessed when microbiological and clinical data become available. De-escalation, appropriate treatment duration, and avoidance of unnecessary broad-spectrum exposure are important strategies for reducing selective pressure.

Conclusion. Optimization of antibacterial pharmacotherapy should combine evidence-based clinical decision-making, pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic principles, microbiological diagnostics, individualized dosing, and structured antimicrobial stewardship. This approach can improve therapeutic effectiveness and safety while contributing to preservation of antibiotic activity at the population level.

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INTRODUCTION

Antibacterial agents are among the most important pharmacotherapeutic achievements of modern medicine. Their introduction fundamentally changed the prognosis of bacterial infections and made possible major advances in surgery, intensive care, organ transplantation, oncology, neonatology, and other fields in which effective control of infection is essential. However, the widespread and sometimes inappropriate use of antibiotics has been accompanied by a progressive increase in antimicrobial resistance. Resistant microorganisms reduce the effectiveness of standard treatment regimens, increase the need for second- and third-line agents, prolong hospitalization, complicate clinical management, and increase the risk of adverse drug reactions and therapeutic failure.

Antimicrobial resistance is therefore not only a microbiological phenomenon but also a major pharmacological and public-health problem. The rational use of antibiotics requires a transition from a simplified model based solely on drug spectrum toward an integrated clinical pharmacology approach in which the characteristics of the microorganism, the pharmacokinetic properties of the drug, pharmacodynamic exposure targets, the site of infection, host factors, and treatment duration are considered simultaneously. Pharmacokinetics describes the processes of absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion, whereas pharmacodynamics characterizes the relationship between antibiotic exposure and antimicrobial effect. These parameters are particularly important because the efficacy of different antibiotic classes is associated with different PK/PD indices. For some agents, therapeutic success depends primarily on the period during which free drug concentration remains above the minimum inhibitory concentration; for others, the maximum concentration-to-MIC ratio or the area under the concentration-time curve-to-MIC ratio is more informative.

Consequently, antibacterial agents cannot be dosed according to a single universal principle. The development of antimicrobial stewardship programs has provided a practical framework for applying these pharmacological concepts at institutional and population levels. Antimicrobial stewardship aims not simply to reduce antibiotic use but to improve the quality of prescribing by ensuring that the most appropriate agent is used for the correct indication, at the appropriate dose, by the most suitable route, and for an evidence-based duration. The WHO AWaRe classification further supports this approach by grouping antibiotics into Access, Watch, and Reserve categories according to their clinical role and stewardship implications. The objective of the present review was to analyze the pharmacological basis of rational antibiotic therapy in the context of antimicrobial resistance and to integrate PK/PD optimization, microbiological diagnostics, de-escalation, AWaRe principles, and antimicrobial stewardship into a unified clinical framework.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was designed as a narrative analytical review of contemporary principles of rational antibacterial pharmacotherapy. The information base included World Health

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Organization materials on antimicrobial resistance and rational antibiotic use, the WHO AWaRe classification, the WHO AWaRe Antibiotic Book, guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on antimicrobial stewardship, and scientific literature in pharmacology and clinical pharmacology. The analysis focused on several interrelated domains: mechanisms and clinical implications of antimicrobial resistance, principles of empirical and targeted therapy, pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic characteristics of antibacterial agents, microbiological diagnostics, drug penetration into sites of infection, individual dose adjustment, adverse effects, drug interactions, route of administration, treatment duration, de-escalation, and institutional stewardship strategies. Particular attention was given to the relationship between antibiotic exposure and minimum inhibitory concentration, including time-dependent, concentration-dependent, and exposure-dependent pharmacodynamic patterns. Patient-specific variables, including age, body weight, renal and hepatic function, concomitant therapy, allergy history, and severity of illness, were also considered. Because the reviewed sources represented guidelines, pharmacological textbooks, stewardship frameworks, and heterogeneous clinical publications, the evidence was synthesized qualitatively rather than through meta-analysis.

RESULTS

The analysis demonstrates that antimicrobial resistance develops through multiple biological mechanisms, including enzymatic antibiotic degradation, reduced drug penetration, activation of efflux systems, alteration of molecular targets, modification of metabolic pathways, and biofilm formation. These mechanisms may decrease effective antibiotic concentrations at the microbial target or reduce the affinity of the drug for its site of action. Beta-lactam resistance illustrates this principle: beta-lactamases can hydrolyze the beta-lactam ring, while alteration of penicillin-binding proteins can reduce target binding. From a pharmacological perspective, effective therapy therefore requires sufficient drug exposure at the site of infection in relation to the susceptibility of the microorganism.

Pharmacodynamic analysis identifies three major exposure patterns. Time-dependent antibiotics achieve optimal activity when free drug concentrations remain above the MIC for an adequate proportion of the dosing interval. In selected clinical situations, prolonged or continuous infusion may improve target attainment. Concentration-dependent antibiotics depend more strongly on achieving a sufficiently high peak concentration relative to the MIC. For exposure-dependent agents, total drug exposure over time, commonly represented by the AUC/MIC ratio, is central to therapeutic efficacy. These principles demonstrate why antibiotic dosing should not be reduced to a simple schedule based only on the number of administrations per day. Rational antibiotic selection requires simultaneous consideration of the site of infection, likely pathogens, local resistance patterns, microbiological susceptibility, tissue penetration, pharmacokinetic properties, pharmacodynamic targets, renal and hepatic function, adverse-effect profile, clinically significant drug interactions, and the risk of selecting resistant organisms. A drug that produces an adequate serum concentration may not necessarily reach an effective concentration in every anatomical compartment.

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Central nervous system infections require sufficient penetration across the blood-brain barrier, while pulmonary infections require adequate exposure in lung tissue and respiratory secretions. For renally eliminated antibiotics, impaired renal function can cause accumulation and toxicity, whereas increased clearance in selected critically ill patients may result in insufficient exposure. These situations justify individualized dose adjustment and, where appropriate, therapeutic drug monitoring. Empirical antibiotic therapy remains clinically necessary when severe infection is suspected and treatment cannot safely be delayed until microbiological results become available. However, empirical therapy should be based on the most likely pathogens, local epidemiology, site of infection, severity of illness, and patient-specific risk factors. Once microbiological results and susceptibility data become available, therapy should be reassessed and, whenever possible, converted to targeted treatment. De-escalation from broad-spectrum to narrower-spectrum therapy reduces unnecessary antimicrobial exposure, selective pressure, microbiome disruption, and potentially the risk of drug-related adverse effects. Rational therapy also requires appropriate duration.

Prolonging treatment beyond the period necessary to achieve clinical control does not automatically improve effectiveness and may increase adverse effects and selection pressure. Conversely, inadequate dosing or excessively short treatment in situations requiring sustained exposure may lead to therapeutic failure. Optimal pharmacotherapy therefore requires balance between efficacy and safety rather than simply minimizing dose or duration. Adverse reactions are an important component of antibiotic decision-making and may include hypersensitivity, gastrointestinal effects, hepatotoxicity, nephrotoxicity, neurotoxicity, cardiac rhythm disturbances, photosensitivity, microbiome disruption, and antibiotic-associated diarrhea. Assessment of allergy history, renal and hepatic function, age, concomitant medication, and overall clinical status is necessary before and during therapy. The WHO AWaRe system provides a population-level framework for rational antibiotic use. Access antibiotics generally include agents recommended as first- or second-choice options for many common infections and are often preferred when clinically appropriate. Watch antibiotics have greater potential for resistance selection and therefore require closer monitoring. Reserve antibiotics are intended primarily for selected infections caused by multidrug-resistant organisms and should be preserved for situations in which alternative agents are inadequate.

The classification should not be interpreted as a distinction between “good” and “bad” antibiotics but as a stewardship tool designed to guide prescribing and monitoring. Antimicrobial stewardship integrates these clinical and pharmacological principles into organized healthcare practice. Core components include institutional commitment, professional accountability, pharmacy expertise, evidence-based interventions, monitoring, reporting, and education. Practical strategies include local prescribing protocols, use of antibiograms, microbiological testing, reassessment of empirical therapy, de-escalation, avoidance of unnecessary combination treatment, optimization of duration, monitoring of antibiotic consumption, and education of healthcare professionals and patients. Prospective audit with feedback and preauthorization of selected agents are among the structured interventions used to improve prescribing quality.

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DISCUSSION

The findings of this review emphasize that the pharmacological optimization of antibiotic therapy must address two objectives simultaneously: achieving the best possible outcome for the individual patient and minimizing the ecological pressure that promotes resistance at the population level. These objectives are complementary rather than contradictory. Inadequate antibiotic exposure can lead to treatment failure and may facilitate selection of resistant subpopulations, whereas unnecessary broad-spectrum or prolonged therapy increases antimicrobial pressure without providing additional clinical benefit. The central role of PK/PD principles is therefore particularly important. Standard doses may not provide equivalent exposure in all patients because pharmacokinetics can change substantially in critical illness, obesity, renal dysfunction, hepatic impairment, altered fluid balance, advanced age, and other clinical states. Changes in volume of distribution and drug clearance may lead either to subtherapeutic concentrations or to toxicity.

Consequently, individualized dosing should be considered an integral part of antimicrobial stewardship rather than a separate pharmacological issue. The concept of therapeutic appropriateness is also more important than spectrum breadth alone. Broad-spectrum therapy may be justified in severe sepsis or in patients at high risk of infection with resistant organisms, but its continued use after microbiological clarification may be unnecessary. A rational strategy therefore begins with sufficiently active empirical therapy when required, followed by early reassessment and narrowing of the regimen when possible. This dynamic approach distinguishes modern stewardship from static prescribing. Microbiological diagnostics are central to this process because they transform probabilistic empirical treatment into pathogen-directed therapy. Appropriate sampling before initiation of antibiotics, when clinically feasible, increases the likelihood that subsequent treatment decisions will be supported by microbiological evidence. However, culture results must be interpreted in the clinical context because detection of a microorganism does not always indicate clinically significant infection, and susceptibility results alone do not guarantee therapeutic success if tissue penetration or pharmacokinetic exposure is inadequate. The WHO AWaRe framework provides an additional level of structure by connecting individual prescribing decisions to public-health objectives. Increasing the proportion of clinically appropriate Access antibiotic use while limiting unnecessary Watch and Reserve exposure can contribute to resistance containment without compromising patient care.

Nevertheless, AWaRe categories should not replace clinical judgment, microbiological data, local resistance information, or disease-specific guidance. Antimicrobial stewardship should likewise not be interpreted as indiscriminate reduction of antibiotic prescribing. The appropriate objective is to eliminate unnecessary exposure while preserving timely and adequate treatment for true bacterial infections. Delayed or insufficient therapy in severe infection can be harmful; therefore, stewardship must emphasize diagnostic accuracy and optimization rather than simple restriction. Another important element is treatment duration. Historically, prolonged antibiotic courses were often considered inherently safer from the standpoint of preventing relapse, but contemporary stewardship principles increasingly support the shortest effective evidence-

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based course for defined clinical conditions. Duration should therefore depend on infection type, clinical response, immune status, source control, microbiological findings, and guideline recommendations. Collaboration between physicians, clinical pharmacologists, pharmacists, microbiologists, epidemiologists, nurses, and patients is essential because rational antibiotic use involves decisions at multiple stages: indication, drug selection, dose, administration, monitoring, reassessment, de-escalation, and discontinuation. Pharmacists and clinical pharmacologists have a particularly important role in PK/PD optimization, drug-interaction assessment, dose adjustment, therapeutic drug monitoring, and stewardship audit. At the institutional level, surveillance of antibiotic consumption and local resistance patterns allows empirical therapy protocols to be adapted to changing epidemiology. At the patient level, reassessment after initial treatment enables clinicians to determine whether infection remains the most likely diagnosis, whether the selected agent is appropriate, whether microbiological data support narrowing of therapy, and whether intravenous treatment can be converted to oral administration. The review also highlights several limitations. It represents a narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis, and the analyzed recommendations originate from different clinical and organizational settings. Resistance patterns vary substantially between institutions and geographic regions, meaning that stewardship strategies must be adapted to local microbiological data. Future research should focus on individualized PK/PD target attainment, rapid microbiological diagnostics, therapeutic drug monitoring, artificial intelligence-supported prescribing systems, integration of local antibiograms into electronic clinical decision support, and outcome-based evaluation of stewardship interventions.

CONCLUSION

Antimicrobial resistance represents a major pharmacological and clinical challenge, and rational antibiotic use is one of the principal strategies available for preserving the effectiveness of existing antibacterial agents. Successful therapy depends not only on intrinsic antimicrobial activity but also on adequate drug exposure at the site of infection, pathogen susceptibility, patient-specific pharmacokinetics, achievement of relevant pharmacodynamic targets, route of administration, treatment duration, and continuous reassessment of clinical response. Rational antibiotic pharmacotherapy should therefore include accurate evaluation of the likelihood and site of bacterial infection, appropriate empirical treatment when clinically indicated, early microbiological diagnostics, individualized dosing, PK/PD optimization, assessment of renal and hepatic function, monitoring of adverse effects, timely reassessment, de-escalation, and use of the shortest effective evidence-based treatment duration. The WHO AWaRe classification provides an important framework for linking individual antibiotic selection to broader antimicrobial stewardship goals, while institutional stewardship programs support systematic implementation through leadership, professional accountability, pharmacy expertise, monitoring, feedback, and education. The fundamental objective of modern pharmacology is therefore not limited to the development of new antimicrobial agents. An equally important task is to preserve the clinical effectiveness of existing antibiotics through scientifically justified, patient-centered, and ecologically responsible pharmacotherapy.

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