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A Comprehensive Review of Microspheres: Fundamentals, Classifications, Preparation Techniques, and Therapeutic Applications in Modern Drug Delivery Systems

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ABSTRACT

Microspheres represent a revolutionary advancement in pharmaceutical technology, offering unprecedented opportunities for controlled drug delivery, targeted therapeutics, and enhanced patient compliance. This comprehensive review examines the fundamental principles, classification systems, preparation methodologies, and diverse therapeutic applications of microspheres in contemporary drug delivery systems. The article systematically analyzes various types of microspheres including biodegradable, non-biodegradable, magnetic, floating, and bioadhesive systems, while critically evaluating their preparation techniques such as emulsification, spray drying, coacervation, and polymerization methods. Recent technological innovations including smart microspheres, stimulus-responsive systems, and nanotechnology-enhanced formulations are thoroughly discussed. The review addresses current challenges in microsphere development, including manufacturing scalability, drug loading efficiency, release kinetics optimization, and regulatory considerations. Clinical applications across diverse therapeutic areas including oncology, vaccine delivery, protein therapeutics, and chronic disease management are comprehensively examined. Future perspectives encompassing personalized medicine applications, advanced materials integration, and emerging biotechnological approaches are explored. This review serves as a valuable resource for pharmaceutical scientists, researchers, and healthcare professionals involved in novel drug delivery system development and clinical applications.

Keywords: Microspheres, controlled drug delivery, biodegradable polymers, targeted therapeutics, pharmaceutical technology, sustained release, encapsulation

Introduction

The pharmaceutical industry has witnessed remarkable evolution in drug delivery technologies, with microspheres emerging as one of the most promising and versatile platforms for controlled drug administration. Microspheres, defined as spherical particles ranging from 1 to 1000 micrometers in diameter, represent a sophisticated approach to addressing fundamental challenges in traditional drug therapy, including poor bioavailability, frequent dosing requirements, systemic toxicity, and patient non-compliance [1].

The concept of microencapsulation and controlled release has its roots in the 1960s, when researchers first recognized the potential of polymer-based systems for modulating drug release kinetics. However, the development of modern microsphere technology represents decades of interdisciplinary collaboration between pharmaceutical scientists, materials engineers, and biomedical researchers. The evolution from simple matrix systems to sophisticated, stimulus-responsive microspheres demonstrates the remarkable progress achieved in this field [2].

Microspheres offer unique advantages over conventional dosage forms, including the ability to protect labile drugs from degradation, provide sustained drug release over extended periods, enable targeted delivery to specific tissues or cells, and reduce dosing frequency while minimizing side effects. These characteristics make microspheres particularly valuable for treating chronic conditions, delivering protein and peptide drugs, and providing sustained release formulations for various therapeutic applications [3].

The versatility of microsphere technology is evidenced by the diverse range of materials available for their construction, including natural polymers such as albumin, gelatin, and chitosan, as well as synthetic polymers like poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA), poly(lactic acid) (PLA), and various other biodegradable and non-biodegradable materials. This material diversity enables the design of microspheres with tailored properties to meet specific therapeutic requirements [4].

Fundamental Principles and Definitions

1. Definition and Characteristics

Microspheres are spherical, free-flowing particles composed of natural or synthetic polymers, designed to encapsulate active pharmaceutical ingredients and provide controlled drug release. The spherical geometry offers several advantages, including uniform drug distribution, predictable release kinetics, and excellent flow properties suitable for various administration routes [5].

The key characteristics that define microspheres include:

Size range: Typically 1-1000 μm in diameter

Spherical morphology: Ensuring uniform drug distribution and release

Polymer matrix: Providing structural integrity and controlling drug release

Drug encapsulation: Protecting active ingredients and modulating release kinetics

Biocompatibility: Ensuring safety for biological applications

2. Microspheres vs. Microcapsules

It is essential to distinguish between microspheres and microcapsules, as these terms are often used interchangeably but represent different structural configurations. Microspheres consist of a solid polymer matrix with drug molecules dispersed throughout the structure, while microcapsules contain a drug-filled core surrounded by a polymer shell. This structural difference significantly impacts drug release mechanisms and manufacturing approaches [6].

3. Drug Release Mechanisms

Drug release from microspheres occurs through several mechanisms:

Diffusion-controlled release: Drug molecules diffuse through the polymer matrix following Fick's laws of diffusion. The release rate depends on drug concentration gradients, polymer porosity, and diffusion coefficients [7].

Erosion-controlled release: Polymer degradation or dissolution controls drug release. Surface erosion provides zero-order kinetics, while bulk erosion typically follows first-order kinetics [8].

Swelling-controlled release: Polymer swelling creates pathways for drug diffusion. The extent of swelling depends on polymer hydrophilicity and crosslinking density [9].

Osmotic-controlled release: Osmotic pressure generated by drug dissolution drives release through semi-permeable membranes [10].

Classification of Microspheres

Microspheres can be classified using various criteria, including polymer composition, drug release mechanism, administration route, and specific applications. Understanding these classification systems is crucial for selecting appropriate microsphere types for specific therapeutic applications [11].

Classification Based on Polymer Composition

1. Biodegradable Microspheres

Biodegradable microspheres are constructed from polymers that undergo enzymatic or hydrolytic degradation in biological environments. These systems offer significant advantages for long-term drug delivery applications, as they eliminate the need for surgical removal and reduce potential toxicity concerns [12].

Natural biodegradable polymers:

Albumin: Excellent biocompatibility and drug loading capacity

Gelatin: Thermally reversible gelling properties and good biodegradability

Chitosan: Mucoadhesive properties and antimicrobial activity

Alginate: Mild gelation conditions suitable for protein encapsulation

Starch: Abundant, cost-effective, and enzymatically degradable [13]

Synthetic biodegradable polymers:

PLGA (Poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid)): Most widely used due to FDA approval and tunable degradation rates

PLA (Poly(lactic acid)): Slower degradation compared to PLGA

PCL (Poly(ε-caprolactone)): Extended degradation periods suitable for long-term delivery

PGA (Poly(glycolic acid)): Rapid degradation for short-term applications [14]

2. Non-biodegradable Microspheres

Non-biodegradable microspheres are composed of stable polymers that do not degrade under physiological conditions. These systems are primarily used for applications requiring permanent implantation or external removal [15].

Common non-biodegradable materials include:

Polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA): Excellent stability and biocompatibility

Polystyrene: Used primarily for research and diagnostic applications

Polyethylene: Chemical inertness and mechanical stability

Silicone polymers: Flexibility and biocompatibility for specialized applications

Classification Based on Specific Properties

1. Magnetic Microspheres

Magnetic microspheres incorporate ferromagnetic materials, enabling external magnetic field-guided targeting and controlled positioning within the body. These systems offer unique advantages for targeted drug delivery and diagnostic applications [16].

Applications include:

- Targeted cancer therapy

- Magnetic resonance imaging contrast enhancement

- Hyperthermia treatment

- Site-specific drug delivery

2. Floating Microspheres

Floating microspheres are designed to remain buoyant in gastric fluid, extending residence time in the upper gastrointestinal tract. This approach is particularly valuable for drugs with narrow absorption windows or requiring sustained gastric release [17].

Design strategies include:

Effervescent systems: Gas generation creates buoyancy

Non-effervescent systems: Low-density matrices provide intrinsic buoyancy

Hollow microspheres: Air-filled cavities ensure floating properties

3. Bioadhesive Microspheres

Bioadhesive microspheres utilize mucoadhesive polymers to adhere to mucosal surfaces, extending contact time and enhancing drug absorption. These systems are particularly useful for oral, nasal, and ocular drug delivery [18].

Common bioadhesive materials:

- Carbopol polymers

- Chitosan derivatives

- Sodium alginate

- Hydroxypropyl methylcellulose

4. Targeted Microspheres

Targeted microspheres incorporate specific ligands, antibodies, or targeting moieties to achieve selective accumulation in target tissues or cells. This approach enables precise drug delivery while minimizing systemic exposure [19].

Targeting strategies include:

Passive targeting: Exploiting enhanced permeability and retention (EPR) effect

Active targeting: Ligand-receptor interactions

Stimuli-responsive targeting: pH, temperature, or enzyme-triggered release

Preparation Methods and Manufacturing Techniques

The selection of appropriate preparation methods is crucial for achieving desired microsphere characteristics, including size distribution, drug loading efficiency, release kinetics, and stability. Various techniques have been developed, each offering specific advantages and limitations [20].

1. Emulsification Techniques

Single Emulsion Method

The single emulsion technique involves dispersing a polymer-drug solution in a continuous phase, followed by solvent evaporation or extraction. This method is suitable for hydrophobic drugs and offers simplicity and scalability [21].

Process steps:

1. Dissolution of polymer and drug in organic solvent

2. Emulsification in aqueous continuous phase

3. Solvent removal by evaporation or extraction

4. Microsphere collection and purification

Advantages:

- Simple process with minimal equipment requirements

- Suitable for hydrophobic drugs

- Good control over particle size

- Scalable for industrial production

Limitations:

- Limited to water-insoluble drugs

- Potential drug loss during processing

- Organic solvent residues

Double Emulsion Method (W/O/W)

The double emulsion technique creates water-in-oil-in-water emulsions, enabling encapsulation of hydrophilic drugs, proteins, and peptides. This method is essential for biologics delivery and represents one of the most versatile microsphere preparation approaches [22].

Process steps:

1. Formation of primary W/O emulsion

2. Re-emulsification in external aqueous phase

3. Solvent removal and microsphere hardening

4. Separation and purification

Advantages:

- Suitable for hydrophilic drugs and proteins

- High encapsulation efficiency for biologics

- Versatile for various drug types

- Well-established for pharmaceutical applications

Limitations:

- Complex multi-step process

- Potential protein denaturation

- Challenging scale-up

- Multiple critical process parameters

2. Spray Drying

Spray drying represents a single-step process for microsphere production, offering excellent scalability and continuous manufacturing capabilities. The technique involves atomizing a drug-polymer solution into a heated chamber, resulting in rapid solvent evaporation and microsphere formation [23].

Process parameters:

- Inlet temperature: 120-200°C
- Outlet temperature: 60-90°C
- Feed rate: 5-20 mL/min
- Atomization pressure: 1-3 bar

Advantages:

- Single-step continuous process
- Excellent scalability
- Rapid processing times
- Good batch-to-batch reproducibility
- Suitable for heat-stable drugs

Limitations:

- High processing temperatures may degrade thermolabile drugs
- Limited control over particle morphology
- Potential for hollow particle formation
- Equipment complexity and cost

3. Coacervation

Coacervation involves phase separation of polymer solutions, resulting in polymer-rich coacervate phases that encapsulate drug particles. This technique is particularly suitable for protein encapsulation and offers mild processing conditions [24].

Types of coacervation:

Simple coacervation: Single polymer system

Complex coacervation: Multiple polymer system with opposite charges

Process steps:

1. Polymer dissolution in suitable solvent
2. Drug suspension or solution addition
3. Coacervation induction by temperature, pH, or ionic strength changes
4. Coacervate hardening and microsphere formation

4. Polymerization Methods

Interfacial Polymerization

Interfacial polymerization occurs at the interface between two immiscible phases, creating polymer shells around drug-containing cores. This method offers excellent control over shell thickness and drug release characteristics [25].

In-situ Polymerization

In-situ polymerization involves monomer polymerization in the presence of dispersed drug particles, resulting in drug encapsulation within the forming polymer matrix [26].

5. Ionic Gelation

Ionic gelation utilizes electrostatic interactions between oppositely charged polymers or between polymers and multivalent ions to form microspheres. This method is particularly suitable for hydrophilic drugs and offers mild processing conditions [27].

Common systems:

- Chitosan-tripolyphosphate
- Alginate-calcium chloride
- Pectin-calcium chloride

Characterization Techniques

Comprehensive characterization of microspheres is essential for ensuring quality, safety, and efficacy. Various analytical techniques are employed to evaluate microsphere properties and performance [28].

1. Morphological Characterization

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)

SEM provides detailed surface morphology information, including particle shape, size distribution, and surface texture. This technique is crucial for evaluating microsphere sphericity and identifying surface defects [29].

Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM)

TEM offers high-resolution internal structure visualization, enabling assessment of drug distribution, polymer matrix organization, and core-shell architectures [30].

2 Particle Size Analysis

Particle size distribution significantly impacts drug release kinetics, injectability, and tissue distribution. Various methods are available for size analysis:

Laser diffraction: Rapid analysis of size distributions

Dynamic light scattering: Suitable for submicron particles

Microscopy-based methods: Direct visualization and measurement

Coulter counter: Accurate sizing based on electrical impedance [31]

3. Drug Loading and Encapsulation Efficiency

Drug loading parameters are critical for therapeutic efficacy and manufacturing economics:

Drug loading (%) = (Weight of drug in microspheres / Weight of microspheres) × 100**

Encapsulation efficiency (%) = (Actual drug loading / Theoretical drug loading) × 100** [32]

4. *In Vitro* Release Studies

Drug release testing provides crucial information about release kinetics and mechanisms. Various methods are employed depending on administration route and release requirements:

USP dissolution apparatus: Paddle and basket methods

Flow-through cells: Continuous flow conditions

Dialysis methods: Membrane-controlled studies

Sample-and-separate techniques: Direct sampling approaches [33]

5. Thermal Analysis

Thermal analysis techniques provide information about polymer transitions, drug-polymer interactions, and thermal stability:

Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC): Glass transition and melting point determination

Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA): Thermal degradation assessment

Dynamic mechanical analysis (DMA): Mechanical property changes with temperature [34]

Clinical Applications and Therapeutic Areas

Oncology Applications

Microspheres have revolutionized cancer treatment by enabling targeted drug delivery while minimizing systemic toxicity. Various approaches have been developed for different cancer types and treatment strategies [35].

Chemotherapy Delivery

Chemotherapeutic microspheres provide sustained drug release at tumor sites, improving therapeutic efficacy while reducing systemic side effects. Notable examples include:

Doxorubicin-loaded microspheres: For hepatocellular carcinoma treatment

Paclitaxel microspheres: Sustained release for various solid tumors

5-Fluorouracil systems: Localized colorectal cancer therapy [36]

Radioembolization

Radioactive microspheres deliver localized radiation therapy for liver tumors. Yttrium-90 microspheres have shown significant clinical success in treating hepatocellular carcinoma and liver metastases [37].

Immunotherapy Delivery

Recent developments include microspheres for cancer immunotherapy delivery, including:

- Checkpoint inhibitor delivery systems

- Cancer vaccine formulations

- Cytokine delivery platforms [38]

Vaccine Delivery

Microsphere-based vaccine delivery systems offer significant advantages over traditional vaccine formulations, including enhanced immune responses, controlled antigen release, and potential for single-dose immunization [39].

Protein and Peptide Vaccines

Microspheres protect protein antigens from degradation while providing sustained release for prolonged immune stimulation. Examples include:

- Hepatitis B vaccine microspheres

- Influenza vaccine systems

- COVID-19 vaccine formulations [40]

DNA Vaccines

DNA vaccine microspheres enable controlled nucleic acid delivery and expression, offering advantages for genetic immunization approaches [41].

Protein and Peptide Therapeutics

The delivery of protein and peptide drugs presents unique challenges due to their instability, large molecular size, and susceptibility to enzymatic degradation. Microspheres provide effective solutions for these biologics [42].

Growth Hormone Delivery

Long-acting growth hormone microsphere formulations have achieved commercial success, providing monthly injections instead of daily dosing [43].

Insulin Delivery

Microsphere-based insulin delivery systems aim to provide sustained glucose control while reducing injection frequency. Various approaches include:

- Oral insulin microspheres

- Inhaled insulin systems

- Long-acting injectable formulations [44]

Ophthalmology

Ophthalmic microspheres enable sustained drug delivery to ocular tissues while overcoming barriers such as tear clearance and blood-retinal barriers [45].

Applications include:

- Intravitreal drug delivery for retinal diseases

- Glaucoma treatment systems

- Anti-inflammatory formulations

- Anti-VEGF therapy for macular degeneration

Pulmonary Drug Delivery

Inhalable microspheres provide targeted pulmonary drug delivery for respiratory diseases while minimizing systemic exposure [46].

Applications include:

- Asthma and COPD treatments

- Pulmonary hypertension therapy

- Lung cancer treatment

- Antimicrobial delivery for respiratory infections

Central Nervous System Delivery

Microspheres offer unique solutions for CNS drug delivery by providing sustained release and potentially crossing the blood-brain barrier [47].

Applications include:

- Parkinson's disease treatment

- Alzheimer's disease therapy

- Brain tumor treatment

- Psychiatric medication delivery

Recent Technological Advances and Innovations

- Smart and Stimulus-Responsive Microspheres

Smart microspheres respond to specific physiological or external stimuli, enabling controlled drug release based on biological needs or environmental conditions [48].

- pH-Responsive Systems

pH-responsive microspheres utilize pH differences in various body regions for targeted drug release:

- Gastric vs. intestinal pH differences

- Tumor microenvironment acidity

- Intracellular pH variations [49]

3. Temperature-Responsive Systems

Thermosensitive microspheres respond to temperature changes for controlled drug release:

- Body temperature-triggered release

- Externally applied hyperthermia

- Phase transition-mediated release [50]

4. Enzyme-Responsive Systems

Enzyme-responsive microspheres utilize specific enzymes for targeted drug release:

- Matrix metalloproteinase-sensitive systems

- Esterase-cleavable linkages

- Glucose oxidase-responsive insulin delivery [51]

5. Nanotechnology Integration

The integration of nanotechnology with microsphere systems has created hybrid delivery platforms with enhanced capabilities [52].

Nanoparticle-in-Microsphere Systems

These systems combine the advantages of both nanoparticles and microspheres:

- Enhanced cellular uptake from nanoparticles

- Sustained release from microsphere matrix

- Reduced burst release effects [53]

Quantum Dot-Loaded Microspheres

Quantum dot incorporation enables:

- Real-time imaging and tracking

- Theranostic applications

- Enhanced cellular visualization [54]

6. 3D Printing and Advanced Manufacturing

Three-dimensional printing technologies have revolutionized microsphere manufacturing, enabling:

- Customized particle sizes and shapes

- Complex internal architectures

- Multi-drug combination systems

- Patient-specific formulations [55]

7. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

AI and ML applications in microsphere development include:

- Formulation optimization

- Process parameter prediction

- Quality control automation

- Personalized medicine approaches [56]

8. Regulatory Considerations and Quality Control

Regulatory Framework

Microsphere products must comply with stringent regulatory requirements varying by region and application. Key regulatory bodies include:

- FDA (United States)

- EMA (European Union)

- PMDA (Japan)

- Health Canada [57]

Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)

GMP compliance is essential for microsphere manufacturing, encompassing:

- Facility design and qualification

- Equipment validation

- Process control and monitoring

- Personnel training and qualification

- Documentation and record keeping [58]

Quality Control Testing

Comprehensive quality control testing includes:

- Identity and purity testing
- Potency and stability assessment
- Sterility and endotoxin testing
- Particle size distribution analysis
- Release rate testing [59]

Stability Studies

Stability testing protocols must address:

- Long-term storage conditions
- Accelerated stability testing
- Photostability assessment
- Container-closure integrity
- Drug release consistency [60]

9. Current Challenges and Limitations

Manufacturing Challenges

Scalability Issues

Translating laboratory-scale microsphere preparation to industrial production presents significant challenges:

- Process parameter optimization
- Equipment design modifications
- Quality consistency maintenance
- Cost-effective production [61]

Batch-to-Batch Variability

Maintaining consistent product quality across different batches requires:

- Robust process control
- Advanced monitoring systems
- Statistical process control
- Risk-based quality management [62]

Drug Loading and Release Challenges

Burst Release

Initial rapid drug release (burst effect) can compromise controlled release objectives:

- Optimization of polymer selection
- Surface modification techniques
- Core-shell architecture design
- Coating strategies [63]

Incomplete Drug Release

Achieving complete drug release while maintaining controlled kinetics presents challenges:

- Polymer degradation optimization
- Pore formation enhancement

- Drug solubility improvement

- Release mechanism fine-tuning [64]

Stability and Storage Issues

Microsphere stability during storage requires addressing:

- Aggregation prevention

- Drug degradation minimization

- Moisture control

- Temperature sensitivity [65]

Biocompatibility and Safety Concerns

Ensuring microsphere safety involves:

- Polymer biocompatibility assessment

- Degradation product evaluation

- Immunogenicity testing

- Long-term safety monitoring [66]

10. Future Perspectives and Emerging Trends

Personalized Medicine Applications

The future of microsphere technology lies in personalized medicine, incorporating:

- Patient-specific dosing regimens

- Genetic factors consideration

- Biomarker-guided therapy

- Individualized release profiles [67]

Advanced Materials Development

Emerging materials for microsphere construction include:

- Biodegradable metal-organic frameworks (MOFs)

- Smart hydrogels with multiple responsiveness

- Biocompatible conducting polymers

- Self-healing polymer systems [68]

Combination Therapies

Future microsphere systems will incorporate:

- Multiple drug combinations

- Synergistic therapeutic approaches

- Sequential drug release patterns

- Companion diagnostic capabilities [69]

Theranostic Applications

Integration of therapeutic and diagnostic capabilities will enable:

- Real-time treatment monitoring

- Image-guided drug delivery

- Treatment response assessment

- Personalized therapy optimization [70]

Regenerative Medicine Applications

Microspheres will play increasing roles in:

- Stem cell delivery systems

- Growth factor delivery platforms

- Tissue engineering scaffolds

- Gene therapy vectors [71]

Environmental Sustainability

Future developments will emphasize:

- Biodegradable and eco-friendly materials

- Green manufacturing processes

- Reduced environmental impact

- Circular economy principles [72]

11. Economic Considerations and Market Analysis

Market Size and Growth Projections

The global microsphere market has experienced substantial growth, driven by increasing demand for controlled-release formulations and targeted drug delivery systems. Market analysis indicates continued expansion across pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device sectors [73].

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Economic evaluation of microsphere systems must consider:

- Development and manufacturing costs

- Improved therapeutic outcomes

- Reduced healthcare utilization

- Enhanced patient quality of life

- Long-term economic benefits [74]

Intellectual Property Landscape

The microsphere field features extensive patent protection, creating both opportunities and challenges for innovation and commercialization [75].

Conclusion

Microspheres have established themselves as indispensable components of modern pharmaceutical technology, revolutionizing drug delivery across diverse therapeutic areas. Their versatility, from simple controlled-release systems to sophisticated stimulus-responsive platforms, demonstrates the remarkable evolution of this technology over the past decades.

The comprehensive analysis presented in this review highlights the multifaceted nature of microsphere development, encompassing fundamental principles, classification systems, preparation methodologies, characterization techniques, and clinical applications. The success of microsphere technology lies in its ability to address fundamental challenges in drug delivery while offering solutions that improve therapeutic efficacy, patient compliance, and quality of life.

Current technological advances, including smart responsive systems, nanotechnology integration, and advanced manufacturing techniques, continue to expand the possibilities for microsphere applications. The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning approaches promises to accelerate development timelines while optimizing formulation characteristics for specific therapeutic requirements.

Despite significant progress, several challenges remain, including manufacturing scalability, regulatory compliance, and long-term stability. Addressing these challenges requires continued collaboration between pharmaceutical scientists, materials engineers, regulatory agencies, and healthcare providers to ensure the safe and effective translation of innovative microsphere technologies from laboratory bench to clinical practice.

The future of microsphere technology is particularly promising in the context of personalized medicine, where patient-specific factors can be incorporated into formulation design and therapy optimization. The integration of theranostic capabilities, combining therapeutic and diagnostic functions, will enable real-time treatment monitoring and personalized therapy adjustment.

Environmental sustainability considerations are becoming increasingly important, driving the development of eco-friendly materials and manufacturing processes. The adoption of green chemistry principles and circular economy approaches will shape the future direction of microsphere technology development.

As we look toward the future, microspheres will undoubtedly continue to play a pivotal role in advancing pharmaceutical science and improving patient care. The ongoing research and development efforts in this field promise to deliver even more sophisticated and effective drug delivery solutions, ultimately benefiting patients worldwide through improved therapeutic outcomes and enhanced quality of life.

The success of microsphere technology ultimately depends on continued innovation, rigorous scientific investigation, and effective translation of research findings into clinical practice. With sustained investment in research and development, coupled with regulatory support and industry collaboration, microspheres will remain at the forefront of pharmaceutical innovation for years to come.

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