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G-PROTEIN–COUPLED RECEPTORS (GPCRS) AS THERAPEUTIC TARGETS: INNOVATION IN PHARMACOLOGICAL MODULATION

P. STEPHENRAJ [(1)] * ,Dr. S. SWARNALATHA [(2)] M.PHARM., Ph. D, Dr. J. KARTHI M.PHARM., Ph. D

[1]. UG Student Department of Pharmacology, Pallavan Pharmacy College, Kanchipuram, 631 502

[2.] Head of Department, Department of pharmacology, Pallavan Pharmacy College, Kanchipuram,631 502

[3.]Principal, Department of Pharmacognosy, Pallavan Pharmacy College, Kanchipuram, 631 502

[*AUTHOR] For Correspondence: P. STEPHEN RAJ

EMAIL: stephenraj.1006@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The largest and most varied family of membrane proteins are G protein–coupled receptors (GPCRs), which control a variety of physiological functions such as immunological responses, metabolism, cardiovascular function, and neurotransmission. About 30–35% of all FDA-approved medications target GPCRs because of their crucial function in human physiology. Orthosteric ligands have been the main focus of traditional drug development efforts, but new developments have redefined GPCR pharmacology by emphasizing receptor oligomerization, allosteric modulation, biased agonism, and spatiotemporal signaling dynamics. The development of next-generation GPCR therapies has been sped up by structural advances from X-ray crystallography and cryo-electron microscopy as well as computational advancements like artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and molecular dynamics simulations. GPCR-targeting drugs are essential in the clinical treatment of neurological, metabolic, cardiovascular, and oncological conditions, and further research into orphan GPCRs is opening up new therapeutic avenues. Notwithstanding their achievements, problems still exist with obtaining subtype selectivity, converting biased signals into therapeutic effect, and dealing with receptor desensitization. The therapeutic landscape could be drastically altered by future developments in precision pharmacology, AI-driven drug design, single-cell multi-omics, and novel modalities like antibodies, nanobodies, and PROTACs. This review emphasizes GPCRs' clinical significance, novel pharmacological approaches, and translational potential, underscoring their ongoing significance as a pillar of contemporary drug research and development.

KEYWORDS: G protein–coupled receptors (GPCRs), artificial intelligence (AI), Orthosteric ligands, GPCR-targeting drugs, GPCRs' clinical significance.

INTRODUCTION:

The human genome has more than 800 members of the G protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) family, making it the biggest and most varied family of membrane receptors (Pierce et al., 2002). These receptors react to a variety of external stimuli, such as hormones, neurotransmitters, ions, and sensory signals, and have a key function in cellular signal transduction. In some situations, β-arrestin-mediated pathways and heterotrimeric G proteins are the main methods that GPCRs trigger intracellular signaling cascades after activation (Luttrell, 2005).

The predominance of GPCRs as therapeutic targets highlights their pharmacological importance. About 35–40% of all licensed medications work by modulating GPCRs, and they target ailments ranging from cancer and neurological disorders to metabolic and cardiovascular diseases (Sriram & Insel, 2018). Despite this achievement, a large number of GPCRs are still poorly understood or orphan receptors, which means that their potential for drug discovery is yet unrealized.

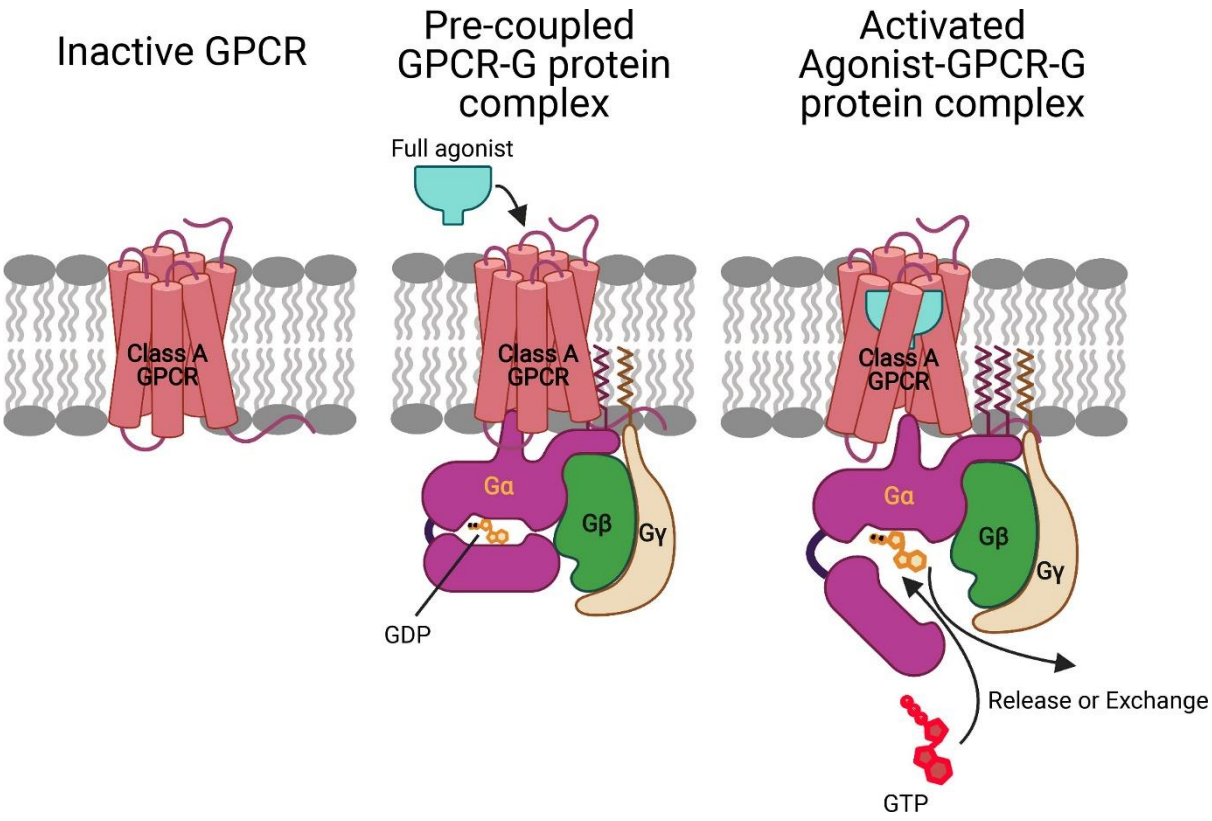
Structure-based drug design is now possible thanks to recent developments in structural biology, such as improvements in X-ray crystallography and cryo-electron microscopy, which have produced high-resolution insights into GPCR conformations (Koehl et al., 2018). Furthermore, new pharmacological ideas like GPCR dimerization, allosteric modulation, and biased agonism are transforming our knowledge of receptor signaling and specificity (Wootten et al., 2018). By adjusting receptor activity while avoiding the activation of undesirable pathways, these methods hold up the possibility of more safe, effective, and selective medicinal medicines.

This review examines the changing field of GPCR-targeted pharmacology, highlighting new developments in signaling bias, ligand design, and structural understanding that are influencing the development of GPCR therapies in the future.

STRUCTURE AND MECHANISM OF ACTION OF GPCRs:

The seven transmembrane (7TM) α-helical structure of G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), a broad family of membrane proteins, has an internal C-terminus and an external N-terminus. The kind of receptor determines whether ligand binding takes place on the extracellular domain or in the transmembrane area (Pierce et al., 2002).
GPCRs change their conformation when they bind to agonists, which makes it possible for them to interact with heterotrimeric G proteins (which are made up of α, β, and γ subunits). This encourages GDP-GTP exchange on the Gα subunit, which causes Gα-GTP and Gβγ to dissociate. Both of these dissociations activate downstream effectors such phospholipase C, adenylyl cyclase, or ion channels, which in turn trigger intracellular signaling cascades (Oldham & Hamm, 2008).

Furthermore, GPCR kinases (GRKs) phosphorylate active receptors, enabling β-arrestin binding, which facilitates internalization, desensitization, and G protein-independent signaling (Luttrell & Lefkowitz, 2002). The idea of biased agonism was developed as a result of GPCRs' capacity to signal across several pathways, opening up new possibilities for selective drug development (Wootten et al., 2018).



INNOVATIONS IN GPCR PHARMACOLOGICAL MODULATION:

In order to target G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), the conventional method has mostly depended on orthosteric ligands that either stimulate or inhibit receptor signaling. However, new techniques that provide increased selectivity, efficacy, and safety have been made possible by recent developments in GPCR biology. These consist of GPCR dimer targeting, bitopic ligands, allosteric modulation, biased agonism, and structure-based drug design.

1. Biased Agonism (Functional Selectivity)

The capacity of some ligands to preferentially activate particular signaling pathways (such as G protein vs. β-arrestin) through the same receptor is known as biased agonism. This enables more individualized treatment outcomes with fewer adverse effects. For example, analgesia with less respiratory side effects has been demonstrated using biased ligands at the μ-opioid receptor (MOR) (Manglik et al., 2016).

2. Allosteric Modulation

Allosteric modulators enable fine-tuning of receptor activation by binding to locations different from the orthosteric ligand-binding site. Receptor subtype selectivity and physiological relevance are improved by positive allosteric modulators (PAMs) and negative allosteric modulators (NAMs), which either increase or decrease receptor signaling only when the endogenous ligand is present (Christopoulos, 2014).

3. Bitopic Ligands

Bitopic ligands are molecules that combine orthosteric and allosteric pharmacophores. They are attractive candidates for drug development because of their unique receptor conformations, increased selectivity, and potential for biased signaling (Lane et al., 2017).

4. GPCR Dimerization and Oligomerization

A recent strategy is to target GPCR dimers or heteromers, especially for receptors that have distinct signaling patterns in dimeric forms. This method can be used to create ligands that preserve physiological processes while specifically altering disease signaling pathways (Milligan, 2009).

5. Structure-Based Computational Tools and Drug Design

Structure-guided ligand discovery is now possible thanks to high-resolution GPCR structures made possible by developments in cryo-EM and X-ray crystallography. Additionally, the design of selective and efficient GPCR modulators is using computational modeling, machine learning, and artificial intelligence (Congreve et al., 2020).

6. Class B/C and Orphan Ligand Bias at GPCRs

The therapeutic landscape is being expanded into metabolic and neurological illnesses by recent efforts to deorphanize GPCRs and investigate ligand bias in Class B (e.g., GLP-1 receptor) and Class C (e.g., metabotropic glutamate receptors) (Wootten et al., 2018).

AREAS OF INTEREST FOR THERAPY:

1. Metabolic Conditions (Obesity and Diabetes)

GPCRs are essential for controlling glucose metabolism and energy balance. GLP-1R, GPR119, GIPR, and GPR40 are among the receptors that are frequently targeted in the treatment of type 2 diabetes and obesity. Preclinical and clinical research on drugs that modulate these receptors, such as dual or multi-agonists, indicates great promise.

2. Disorders of the Central Nervous System (CNS)

In neurological and psychiatric illness mechanisms, GPCRs such dopamine, serotonin (5-HT), PAC1, and adenosine receptors are essential. Biased agonists and allosteric modulators that target conditions including depression, addiction, epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease are examples of innovations.

3. Oncology (Cancer & Tumor Microenvironment)

New approaches focus on GPCRs, including chemokine receptors (e.g., CXCR2), and GPER1 in cancers such as gastric cancer. Treatments include agonists, antagonists, and combination therapies with immunotherapy or chemotherapy to improve the microenvironment and tumor progression.

4. Cardiovascular Disease & Heart Failure

GPCR modulation, including targeting the G protein βγ subunit to influence GRK2-mediated signaling, has therapeutic implications in heart failure and cardiac dysfunction.

5. Immune and Inflammatory Disorders

GPCRs like chemokine and adenosine receptors orchestrate immune responses and inflammation. Targeting these receptors offers potential for treating conditions like autoimmune disorders, chronic inflammation, and beyond.

6. Infectious Diseases (e.g. HIV, Tuberculosis)

GPCRs such as CCR5 serve as co-receptors in HIV entry, making them valuable therapeutic targets (e.g., CCR5 antagonists). Similarly, chemokine receptors play roles in immune responses to mycobacterial infections, presenting a potential in host-directed therapies.

7. Dermatological Conditions

GPCRs in the skin are emerging targets for treating dermal injuries, chronic inflammatory dermatoses, and skin cancers. Structural insights (e.g., via cryo-EM) and targeting GPCR–TRP channel complexes are advancing precision dermatological therapies.

GPCRS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DRUG DISCOVERY:

The structural diversity, conformational flexibility, and functional bias of G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) make them one of the most druggable target groups, but they also make selective ligand identification difficult. Virtual screening, structure prediction, de novo ligand design, and polypharmacology analysis are all made possible by artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) techniques, which are revolutionizing GPCR-targeted drug discovery.

1. GPCR Structural Prediction Using AI
High-accuracy 3D structural models of GPCRs, including their inactive and active states, are now available thanks to recent developments in deep learning (such as AlphaFold).

For GPCR subtypes without crystal/cryo-EM structures, structural predictions speed up structure-based drug design (SBDD).

2. Ligand Prediction and Virtual Screening
Millions of chemicals are quickly screened for GPCR binding by AI-driven algorithms.
Graph neural networks (GNNs) and DeepDocking are more accurate than standard docking at predicting binding affinities. For instance, AI has been utilized to find novel ligands for opioid and adenosine A2A receptors.

3. Design of De Novo Drugs
Reinforcement learning, variational autoencoders, and GANs are examples of generative AI models that create new GPCR ligands with optimal characteristics. For instance, μ-opioid receptor ligands with less anticipated adverse effects were generated by deep generative models.

4. Polypharmacology and Predicting Off-Target
In order to reduce negative effects, AI can detect possible off-targets by modeling multi-target GPCR interactions. It aids in the development of polypharmacological medications for complicated illnesses (such as metabolic and mental illnesses).

5. Biased Signaling by AI and GPCR
Using extensive datasets, machine learning algorithms are able to categorize ligand activity as biased agonists, antagonists, or allosteric modulators allows functional selectivity to be predicted before to in vitro testing.

6. Prospects for the Future
AI, cryo-EM, and high-throughput pharmacology together result in more accurate GPCR drug discovery. Predicting patient-specific GPCR pharmacogenomic responses holds promise for customized treatment. AI-generated molecules still face ethical and legal issues.

CLINICAL RELEVANCE AND APPROVED DRUGS:

Why GPCRs are important in therapeutic settings (reusable one-liner)

GPCRs are important in almost every therapeutic domain, as evidenced by the fact that about one-third of all marketed medications act at them (about 475–700 pharmaceuticals target 108–134 different receptors, depending on curation).

1. Psychology and Neurology
Dopamine D2/D3 (Gi/o) — cornerstone for antipsychotics; blockage diminishes positive symptoms of schizophrenia.
medications: aripiprazole (D2 partial), olanzapine, risperidone, and haloperidol.

2. HT receptors — migraine/anti-migraine (different subtypes).
Drugs for acute migraine include lasmiditan (first-in-class selective 5-HT1F agonist, 2019) and triptans (5-HT1B/1D agonists). S1P receptors (Gi): immuno-neuromodulation in multiple sclerosis by restriction of lymphocyte egress.
Medications: ponesimod, ozanimod, siponimod, and fingolimod.

3. Migraine and Pain
The CGRP receptor (Gs) is essential to the pathogenesis of migraines.
Medication: rimegepant/ubrogepant/atogepant (oral receptor antagonists; acute/prevention), erenumab (mAb to CGRP receptor; prevention).

4. Obesity and Metabolic
Significant benefits for T2D and obesity are provided by the GLP-1 receptor (class B; Gs), which increases insulin secretion and slows stomach emptying.
Semaglutide (Ozempic/Wegovy/Rybelsus) is a medication.

Dual GIP/GLP-1 receptor co-agonism: increased effectiveness in lowering blood sugar and weight.
Drug: tirzepatide — obesity (Zepbound, 2023) and type 2 diabetes (2022).

Rare hereditary obesity; energy homeostasis; MC4R (melanocortin-4; Gs).
Drug: setmelanotide (2020) for deficits in POMC/PCSK1/LEPR.

Sexual desire dysfunction is caused by melanocortin (MC) receptors.
Bremelanotide (2019) is a medication for HSDD.

5. Heart and Renal
Rate/contractility of β1-adrenergic (Gs/Gi): mortality benefit in HF/CAD.
Metoprolol, bisoprolol, and carvedilol (commonly known as β/α) are medications. (See broad overviews of GPCR drugs.)

Blocking AT1 (angiotensin II type-1; Gq/Gi) reduces blood pressure and cardiovascular events by causing vasoconstriction and aldosterone.
ARBs (losartan, valsartan, etc.) are medications. AT1R is a classic GPCR target, as confirmed by mechanistic and clinical evaluations.

S1P receptors are also becoming more prominent in renal and cardiovascular inflammation (mechanistic significance).

6. The respiratory
In asthma and COPD, β2-adrenergic (Gs) — bronchodilation.
Drugs: indacaterol (LABAs/ultra-LABAs), formoterol, and albuterol/salbutamol. (Refer to conventional overviews of pharmacology.)

Airflow is improved by antagonism of muscarinic M3 (Gq), which causes bronchoconstriction and mucus.
medications, such as tiotropium (LAMA).

7. Diseases of Infectiousness and Immunology
Blocking the HIV entrance co-receptor CCR5 (Gi) stops the virus from entering.
Maraviroc (2007) is the drug.

Hematopoietic cell trafficking is mediated by CXCR4 (Gi); antagonists mobilize stem cells for apheresis.
Plerixafor (Mozobil) is the medication.

8. Bone and Endocrine
PTH1 receptor: osteoanabolic signaling (class B; Gs/Gq).
medications: abaloparatide (PTHrP analog, 2017) and teriparatide (PTH 1–34, 2002). PTH1R is specifically identified as the GPCR target in labels and reviews.

9. The Health of Women
Hypothalamic thermoregulation is regulated by the neurokinin-3 receptor (NK3R; Gq); vasomotor symptoms are treated by antagonism.
Fezolinetant (2023) is the drug.

10. Dermatology and Ophthalmology:
The uveoscleral outflow is increased by the prostanoid FP receptor (Gq).
The medication for open-angle glaucoma is latanoprost.

For completeness, the SMO (class F "GPCR-like")—Hedgehog route in BCC (structurally 7-TM but unusual) is included here.
medications: sonidegib and vismodegib. (Belongs to the Frizzled/SMO family.)
GPCRS AS THERAPEUTIC TARGETS: OBSTACLES AND PROSPECTS

Principal Difficulties: -

1. Off-target effects and subtype selectivity:
Subtype selectivity is difficult to obtain due to highly conserved orthosteric locations; many ligands cause negative effects by hitting numerous GPCRs.

2. Bringing skewed agonism into the medical setting:
The assay system and analysis model determine how bias is quantified; in vitro pathway bias may not always indicate human safety or efficacy.

3. Complexities of allosteric modulation:
Although allosteric sites are less conserved (excellent for selectivity), they complicate SAR with context-dependent effects, probe dependence, and saturability.

4. Conformational landscapes that are dynamic:
There are several active and intermediate states of GPCRs, and it is still challenging to capture pertinent conformations for structure-based design.

5. Trafficking, tolerance, and receptor desensitization:
β-arrestin-mediated desensitization/internalization varies by cell type and can reduce long-term efficacy (e.g., opioids, β-agonists).

6. Context-dependent oligomers:
Pharmacological complexity is increased by functional GPCR homo/heterodimers; the composition and expression levels of these dimers can cause different drug responses in different tissues.

7. Delivery of CNS:
There is still a barrier to obtaining enough brain exposure with suitable safety and selectivity (BBB penetration, P-gp efflux).

8. oGPCRs, or orphan GPCRs:
Target validation is slowed by hundreds that are still poorly defined and lack endogenous ligands or physiology.

9. Reproducibility and assay bias:
non-comparable potencies/efficacy and bias factors are produced by various readouts (cAMP, Ca2+, β-arrestin, and label-free) and analytical frameworks.

10. Pharmacology and polypharmacology for safety:
Numerous GPCR ligands interact with CNS or cardiac/vascular receptors; it is still difficult to predict long-term safety (e.g., class effects).

11. Limited coverage of active states and complexes in terms of structure:
:Despite advancements, not all GPCRs have high-resolution structures, nor do all signaling states with unique transducers.

Prospects for the future: -

1. A more comprehensive structure-guided design:
To direct SBDD across understudied subfamilies, combine deep-learning structural models (active/inactive ensembles) with cryo-EM/X-ray.

2. Bitopic and dualsteric ligands:
To enhance subtype selectivity and bias control, design ligands that straddle orthosteric + allosteric locations.

3. Metrics for quantitative, interpretable bias:
To connect bias to clinical outcomes, standardize reference ligands and analyses and include systems-level readouts (phosphoproteomics, transcriptomics).

4. Covalent/allosteric chemotypes and allosteric toolboxes:
Extend the use of kinetic tuning (residence time), silent allosteric modulators, and positive/negative allosteric modulators (PAMs/NAMs)

5. Target validation using chemogenetics and optogenetics:
Prior to clinical programs, deconvolute pathway- and circuit-specific GPCR activities in vivo using DREADDs and opsins.

6. GPCR-related biologics:
Improve tissue delivery by developing antibodies and nanobodies that bias signaling, limit ligand access, or stabilize particular conformations.

7. Membrane GPCR-specific targeted protein degradation:
When antagonism is not enough, investigate extracellular-directed degraders (such as LYTAC-like concepts) to down-modulate hyperactive receptors. Concept references: generic TPD for membrane proteins (methodological foundation beyond traditional PROTACs); Hutchings 2017 (biological landscape).

8. AI and ML across the workflow:
Apply machine learning (ML) to multi-target optimization, de novo ligand discovery, virtual screening, and ADMET and functional selectivity prediction.

9. Spatial and single-cell multi-omics:
Discover precision-medicine niches by mapping GPCR expression, splice variants, and signaling partners across cell states and tissues.

11. Modality blending in neurology and metabolism:
Increase the production of CNS-penetrant small compounds with designed bias and peptidic and long-acting GPCR agonists (such as GLP-1R and dual/triple incretin).

CONCLUSION:

G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), which make up around one-third of all FDA-approved medications, continue to be the most adaptable and clinically verified class of pharmacological targets. GPCR pharmacology has evolved over the last 20 years from a receptor–ligand "on/off" model to a complex framework that includes spatiotemporal dynamics, allosteric regulation, biased signaling, and receptor oligomerization. Structure-based drug design (SBDD) and the logical creation of selective modulators have been made possible by structural advances, especially high-resolution cryo-EM and X-ray crystallography, which have given previously unheard-of insight into receptor conformations.

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