Nanomedicines:
How Innovations in Drug Delivery Technology Can Unlock the Potential of Nanoparticles

In the past few decades, nanomedicine has emerged as one of the most promising opportunities in healthcare. By engineering materials at the nanoscale, scientists have unlocked a new universe of possibilities for diagnostics, imaging and, most notably, drug delivery. The recent rapid development and success of mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccines, which rely on lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) to deliver their payload, have proven that nanomedicines are a powerful reality capable of transforming global health. These tiny, engineered particles can protect sensitive drugs, enhance their solubility and deliver them precisely to a targeted site in the body, dramatically improving treatment efficacy while reducing side effects.

However, the very characteristic that makes nanomedicines so revolutionary – their intricate, customisable complexity – also presents the biggest hurdle to their widespread adoption. Unlike traditional small-molecule drugs, nanoparticles are not single compounds. They are complex assemblies with multiple components, and their performance is governed by a range of interdependent characteristics, from their size and shape to their surface chemistry and stability. This complexity makes developing and manufacturing them challenging, especially when it comes to ensuring they are consistently safe and effective.

To truly unlock the full potential of this technology, we must overcome the analytical bottleneck that currently affects the industry. The standard tools and methods that have served pharmaceutical development for decades are often insufficient for the unique demands of nanomedicines. New and more sophisticated approaches are needed to provide a comprehensive, multifaceted view of these complex particles from the earliest stages of development.

The Complex Nature of Nanomedicines

The power of nanomedicine lies in its intricate, multi-component design. Nanomedicines are sophisticated vehicles that encapsulate and protect their payload. These nanoparticles are composed of biocompatible materials such as lipids, polymers or metal oxides, which form the structural framework. The therapeutic payload (a small molecule, a protein, or a nucleic acid) is then integrated within this matrix. Some nanomedicines are further enhanced with targeting moieties on their surface, designed to bind specifically to certain receptors, ensuring a more precise delivery. This layered complexity enables nanomedicines to protect sensitive APIs from degradation and directing them to a specific site of action.

However, this sophistication comes with a significant analytical challenge. A nanomedicine's quality is determined by a delicate interplay of various critical quality attributes (CQAs). These include, among others:

- **Particle Size and Morphology**
  The size and shape of a nanoparticle dictate its journey through the body – how it circulates, where it accumulates and how it is cleared. A broad size distribution, or polydispersity, can lead to unpredictable behaviour and inconsistent delivery.

- **Surface Properties**
  The surface charge and coating (like PEG) determine how the nanoparticle interacts with its biological environment. A properly engineered surface helps the particle evade the immune system and prevent rapid clearance.

- **Drug Release Kinetics**
  The rate and mechanism by which the payload is released must be precisely controlled. The drug must be retained long enough to reach its target but released effectively once it arrives.

The Current Analytical Bottleneck

The complex nature of nanomedicines creates a formidable analytical challenge for developers. A critical first step in the development process is to identify and characterise the CQAs: the physical, chemical, and biological properties that directly impact the product's safety and efficacy. However, in the early stages of development, the exact properties that will prove to be critical are often poorly understood. This lack of a clear target makes it challenging to design appropriate analytical methods, which can lead to a reactive rather than proactive development strategy. Researchers often rely on a limited set of standard analytical techniques, which may not be sufficient to capture the full picture of a nanomedicine's behaviour.

One of the most widely used methods for nanoparticle characterisation is dynamic light scattering (DLS), primarily because of its speed and ease of use. However, DLS has several significant limitations that make it ill-suited for the complex demands of nanomedicines. For example, DLS has relatively low resolution, meaning it struggles to differentiate between particles that are similar in size. A sample containing a mixture of monomers and dimers may appear as a single peak, leading to a false sense of homogeneity. Also, DLS is inherently biased towards larger particles, which scatter light more intensely. In a polydisperse sample, a small population of larger aggregates can "overshadow" the signal from the majority of smaller, appropriately sized particles, rendering them effectively invisible. While techniques like nanoparticle tracking analysis (NTA) offer higher resolution, they often have a narrower size range and only analyse a small fraction of the sample. Similarly, transmission electron microscopy (TEM) provides valuable visual information on morphology and shape, but its accuracy for size measurement is often compromised by the need for extensive sample preparation, which can alter the nanoparticle's structure.

Adding to these technical hurdles is the evolving regulatory landscape. Because nanomedicines are a relatively new class of pharmaceuticals, which encompasses a very broad range of chemistries and morphologies, there are currently limited comprehensive global standards or guidelines to steer manufacturers through the analytical process, especially in early stages of development. Each nanomedicine is a unique entity, requiring its own set of tailored specifications and analytical methods. This absence of a standardised framework means that developers must often forge their own path, leading to uncertainty and potential delays.

The lack of comprehensive standardised reference materials for techniques like DLS also poses a significant challenge, as it becomes difficult to ensure the accuracy and reproducibility of results across different labs and batches. As regulatory bodies, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and pharmacopoeias establish new and updated guidelines, developers face the risk that methods they have already invested significant time and resources in may become outdated, requiring costly and time-consuming revalidation. This analytical bottleneck, characterised by limited tools and evolving standards, slows down the development cycle, increases costs, and ultimately hinders the translation of promising nanoparticle-based therapies into clinical practice.

Embracing Advanced Analytical Innovation

Overcoming the challenges of nanomedicine development requires a strategic shift, moving away from a reactive, phase-by-phase approach to a proactive one that embraces advanced analytical technologies from the earliest stages. By investing in state-of-the-art infrastructure and specialised personnel, drug developers can gain a deeper, more robust understanding of their products. This is about getting the right data that can accurately capture the complexity of these novel therapeutics, saving time and resources in the long run. The key lies in adopting sophisticated, multi-modal techniques that can measure multiple CQAs simultaneously.

One of the best examples of this shift is the use of asymmetric flow field-flow fractionation (AF4) coupled with multiple online detectors. Unlike traditional methods that analyse a bulk sample, AF4 first separates nanoparticles based on their size with high resolution. This is achieved by applying a gentle cross-flow force perpendicular to a laminar flow stream within a channel, which separates particles without disrupting them. This gentle, high-resolution separation offers a significant advantage over conventional techniques, such as size-exclusion chromatography, which can shear or alter delicate nanoparticles.

The real power of AF4 emerges when it is coupled with a suite of detectors, offering a multi-dimensional view of the nanoparticles:

- **AF4-DLS**
  This pairing overcomes the limitations of standalone DLS by first separating the particles, then analysing each fraction to provide a high-resolution, accurate particle size distribution.

- **AF4-MALS**
  Coupled with multi-angle light scattering (MALS), AF4 measures the molar mass distribution and the radius of gyration (Rg), providing deeper insight into the particle's structure.

- **AF4-MALS-DLS**
  By combining all three, researchers can calculate a crucial "shape factor" (Rg/Rh) to gain indirect insight into the nanoparticle's morphology and detect the presence of different shapes or morphologies (e.g., core-shell structure vs compact sphere)

The Impact of Innovation

The adoption of advanced analytical techniques is a catalyst for accelerating the entire drug development lifecycle of nanomedicines. By moving sophisticated characterisation tools, such as AF4-MALS-DLS, to the forefront of the development process, companies can significantly mitigate risk and reduce the potential for costly delays. A deeper understanding of a nanomedicine's CQAs at the bench allows researchers to identify potential issues, such as aggregation or payload instability, before they become major problems. This front-loaded approach to quality control means that product specifications are more robust, and manufacturing processes can be optimised with greater confidence, leading to more predictable outcomes and a more streamlined path to the clinic.

Additionally, this enhanced level of characterisation directly translates into improved safety and efficacy for patients. A nanomedicine's performance is intimately linked to its physical and chemical properties. A formulation with a tightly controlled size distribution and stable morphology is more likely to exhibit consistent behaviour in the body, ensuring the drug reaches its target effectively and at the correct dose.

Conversely, a poorly characterised product with significant batch-to-batch variation poses a higher risk of adverse effects or inconsistent therapeutic benefit. Advanced analytics provide the granular detail needed to ensure this consistency, offering a level of quality assurance that is simply not possible with conventional methods.

Finally, the data generated by these innovative technologies is crucial for a successful regulatory strategy. Regulatory agencies are keenly focused on a product's CQAs and expect developers to have a deep understanding of how they relate to performance. The comprehensive, multi-modal data provided by techniques like AF4-MALS-DLS offers a compelling narrative for regulators, demonstrating a thorough and proactive approach to quality control. Instead of being reactive to new guidelines, companies can use this data to justify their specifications and manufacturing controls proactively. This helps meet regulatory expectations and facilitates a more efficient review process, enabling the advancement of groundbreaking nanomedicines from the lab to the patients who need them most.

Beyond the Bottleneck

The promise of nanomedicine is immense, offering a new era of targeted, effective, and safe therapies. Yet, this potential remains partially untapped due to the profound complexity inherent in these tiny therapeutic particles. The journey from lab to market for a nanomedicine is fraught with challenges, from deciphering the myriad of CQAs to navigating a nascent and evolving regulatory landscape. The limitations of conventional analytical methods have long served as a bottleneck, creating uncertainty and slowing the pace of innovation.

To fully realise the vision of nanomedicine, a fundamental shift in strategy is required. We must embrace a proactive approach, integrating advanced analytical technologies early in the development cycle. Tools like AF4, coupled with detectors for MALS and DLS, offer a robust solution, providing a multi-dimensional view of nanoparticles that was previously unattainable. This integrated approach enables the high-resolution measurement of particle size, morphology, stability, and drug loading, providing researchers with the comprehensive data necessary to understand their product fully. This is where working with a specialised contract development and manufacturing organisation (CDMO) becomes essential. Partnering with a CDMO that has invested in this state-of-the-art technology enables developers to leverage expert knowledge and infrastructure from the outset, helping them navigate complexity and meet evolving regulatory demands with confidence.

This investment in analytical innovation is about scientific rigour and translating breakthrough research into tangible patient benefits. By gaining a deeper understanding of nanomedicines at the bench, we can ensure greater product consistency, enhance patient safety, and accelerate the regulatory approval process. The future of nanomedicine lies not only in designing ingenious particles but also in using intelligent tools to characterise them. This fusion of advanced drug delivery technology and sophisticated analytical methods is the blueprint for breakthroughs, paving the way for a new generation of life-saving therapies to reach those who need them most.

Maria Marioli

Maria Marioli, Senior for Principal Scientist – Group Lead, Nanomedicine Analytical Chemistry, Ardena. Maria holds a PhD in Analytical Chemistry from the University of Amsterdam, and specialises in the characterisation of large molecules and nanoparticles for pharmaceutical applications. After working for several years in large pharmaceutical companies, Maria joined Ardena and she is responsible for the analytical method development and validation of nano-medicine projects.

Arno Vermote

Graduated in pharmaceutical sciences and having obtained a PhD in medicinal chemistry, Arno started his career as a medical writer for a Belgian CRO. Later, he joined Ardena as a CMC Writer, quickly advancing to Senior CMC Writer. Alongside client support, he took on a technical sales role for the CMC Regulatory team, which soon evolved into a full-time business development position. Over the years, Arno has continued to expand his commercial responsibilities, now serving as Business Development Director. In this role, Arno is responsible for driving growth across all Ardena services, including drug substance, drug product, nanomedicines, bioanalytics, and CMC regulatory.