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Research Article

Designing targeted drugs against EGFR protein in the treatment of lung cancer

Michael Askari *

Department of Computer Engineering, Payame Noor University (PNU), Sari Branch, Sari, Mazandaran, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Third-generation covalent EGFR inhibitors, including WZ4002, Osimertinib (AZD9291), and PF-06459988, have been developed to overcome drug resistance by irreversibly binding to specific residues within the EGFR active site, particularly Cys797 and Met790. To investigate these interactions and resistance mechanisms, we performed molecular docking analyses to model and evaluate the binding behavior of these inhibitors with EGFR. Structural results demonstrated that these compounds form highly specific covalent interactions that block EGFR activation and reduce cancer cell signaling. Additionally, second-generation inhibitors such as Afatinib and PD168393 were also shown to covalently bind to Cys797, with 3D structural models highlighting the stable interactions at this critical residue. Comparative docking-based analysis of first-, second-, and third-generation EGFR inhibitors revealed that while early-generation agents like Gefitinib and Afatinib rely on reversible or irreversible binding, newer inhibitors such as WZ4002 and Osimertinib are structurally optimized for enhanced activity against resistant EGFR mutations. The clear distinction between covalent irreversible and covalent-reversible inhibitors further illustrates differences in therapeutic potential. These docking-based findings emphasize the importance of precise molecular design in developing effective treatments against EGFR-driven drug-resistant cancers.

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1. Introduction

Currently, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and cancer are recognized as the most difficult problems in modern societies [1]. Lung cancer is identified as the most often diagnosed cancer and the leading cause of cancer-related morality, and unfortunately lung cancer has been the most prevalent cancer in the period of the past few decades [2]. There are different NCDs, which have risk factors including smoking, obesity, diet, genetics, and environmental factors such as air pollution can contribute to developing lung cancer [3]. Lung cancer includes two main types, small cell lung cancer (SCLC) and non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), which respond differently to treatment modalities of radiation therapy and chemotherapy, including any complementary methods of treatment [4]. Surgical excision of the tumour is one of the most effective treatment options, but this type of treatment has significant side effects. This highlights the need for new targeted drugs [5]. In NSCLC, a new class of drugs emerged and acted by inhibiting certain tyrosine kinase receptors essential for cell growth and survival; these include the hepatocyte growth factor receptor (c-Met), epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), and anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) [6].

Covalent inhibitors that are selective to EGFR have become important for patients who are resistant to other therapies [7]. irst-generation EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs), such as gefitinib and erlotinib, are reversible, while second-generation inhibitors, such as afatinib and dacomitinib, are irreversible and designed to overcome resistance mechanisms, such as T790M, which is a common mutation present in more than half of resistant cases [8]. Poziotinib, Dacomitinib, Allitinib, and Neratinib are second-generation EGFR inhibitors which are electrophilic and react with a specific cysteine (Cys797) surrounding the ATP-binding site of EGFR to form a covalent bond.[9]. Engel et al. demonstrated a useful formulation of irreversible EGFR inhibitors through structural and biochemical analyses [10]. In another study, Schwart et al. proposed a kinetic framework for covalent EGFR inhibitors, pointing out the roles of reversible binding, chemical modification of cysteine, and resistance mechanisms in modulating potency [11]. Early clinical trials by Jiang et al. revealed that third-generation EGFR-TKIs were effective in

* Corresponding Author: Michael Askari, Email Address: michaelaskari2002@gmail.com

patients with double-mutated tumors (EGFR L858R / T790M or ex19del / T790M) and also showed high selectivity for mutant EGFR, thus reducing side effects in the skin and gastrointestinal system by non-selective inhibition of WT-EGFR [12]. Research by Fry et al. has shown that specific inhibitors irreversibly inactivate the receptor tyrosine kinases EGFR and erbB2 and have potent antitumor activity without toxicity, indicating that these compounds represent a promising new generation of drugs for proliferative diseases [13]. Moreover, Tan et al. designed next-generation covalent inhibitors of FIIN-2 and FIIN-3 based on a structure that targets resistant FGFR1 / 2 mutations. although resistant mutations limit the efficacy of treatments, FIIN-3 simultaneously inhibits EGFR by binding to different cysteines [14].

Recently, the development of third-generation inhibitors, such as osimertinib (AZD9291), rociltinib, olmotinib, and other similar drugs, has focused specifically on targeting tumors harboring the T790M mutation [9]. Clinical trials have demonstrated that patients with EGFR mutations exhibit high response rates to treatment. In particular, first- and second-generation TKIs have achieved response rates exceeding 70%, along with marked improvements in progression-free survival [15]. Mutations in the EGFR kinase domain, such as L858R and exon 19 deletions, increase cancer activity and growth and have therefore become important therapeutic targets. Patients with these mutations usually show a positive clinical response, with response rates between 50% and 80% to first-generation inhibitors, such as gefitinib and erlotinib [7]. he primary purpose of this research was to design and analyze targeted covalent inhibitors to overcome mutated EGFR proteins, associated with resistance to lung cancer therapy. It allowed for detailed simulations to investigate the attaching behavior and covalent binding mechanisms of novel inhibitors and the novel inhibitors with the existing and acceptable quality accurate structural data collected from PubChem API with advanced molecular modeling method. The results indicated key molecular characteristics that could improve selectivity and potency. The finding also provided new insights and approaches for drug design on increased therapeutic efficacy and minimized off-target effects.

2. Computational Methods

The researchers used information and resources from the PubChem database to conduct all simulations and other molecular modeling in this research project. PubChem also provided detailed molecular properties, bioactivities, and other supporting literature on the chemical structures of EGFR and its inhibitors. The researchers used molecular docking and structural analysis methods to establish how EGFR and inhibitors were binding together, and any chemical, three-dimensional model used for computational work, including ligand preparation and target protein modelling were derived from the structural and chemical data from Pubchem.

3. Results and discussions

Fig. 1. illustrates the chemical structures and binding interactions of several covalent inhibitors WZ4002, osimertinib, and PF-06459988 with the EGFR protein. These inhibitors specifically target two critical amino acid residues, Cys797 and Met790, within the EGFR kinase domain. WZ4002 and osimertinib are third-generation inhibitors developed to overcome resistance mutations, particularly the T790M mutation, which commonly reduces the effectiveness of earlier therapies. PF-06459988 shares similar covalent binding characteristics, reinforcing its role as a potent EGFR inhibitor.

At the molecular level, Cys797 and Met790 are essential for EGFR activation and function. The covalent bond formed between these inhibitors and Cys797 effectively locks the receptor in an inactive state, thereby blocking downstream signaling pathways that promote cancer cell proliferation. The image highlights the precise distances and orientations of these covalent bonds, underscoring the meticulous design that ensures high specificity and strong binding affinity to the active site of EGFR. Compared to first and second-generation reversible EGFR inhibitors such as gefitinib and erlotinib, which often fail against T790M-mediated resistance, these third-generation covalent inhibitors demonstrate significantly improved efficacy and selectivity [16, 17]. For example, osimertinib exhibits over 200-fold greater potency against T790M mutants relative to wild-type EGFR, which translates into enhanced clinical outcomes and reduced side effects [18]. WZ4002 was among the pioneering compounds to show selective covalent binding to mutant EGFR, providing a structural basis for overcoming resistance [19]. PF-06459988 further advances this approach by optimizing binding affinity and minimizing off-target proteome reactivity [20].

Fig. 2A shows the 3D structure of the EGFR kinase domain, emphasizing key regions. The catalytic loop and cysteine residues (C797, C775, C818, C939, C950) are labeled, indicating the active site and potential covalent modification sites.
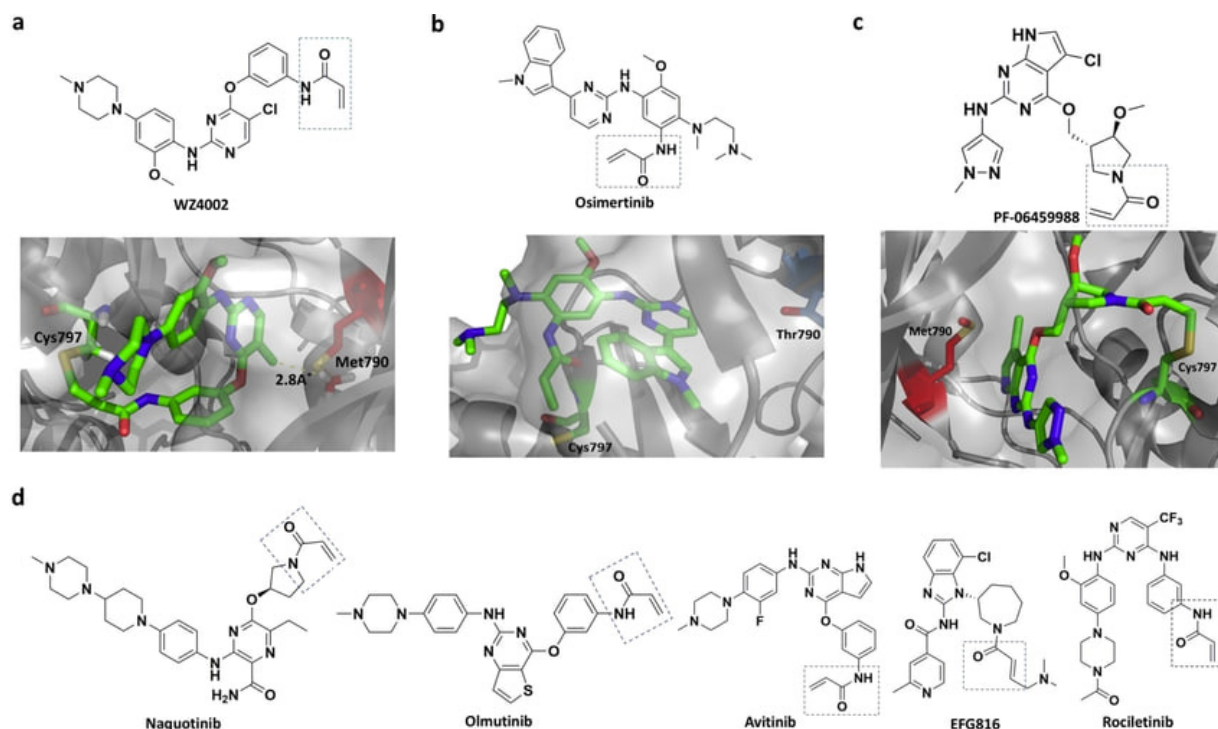

Fig. 1. Covalent Inhibitors and Their Interactions with EGFR.

Based on the figure, AMNP (which appears to be a non-covalent inhibitor or ligand) does not seem to form a covalent bond with Cys797. Instead, it likely interacts through non-covalent interactions such as hydrogen bonds, van der Waals forces, or electrostatic interactions within the binding pocket. The figure shows adenylylimidodiphophate (AMPPNP) positioned near Cys797, but there is no indication of a covalent linkage, which is consistent with the typical behavior of non-covalent inhibitors. In contrast, Afatinib's structure in Fig. 2B clearly bonds covalently with Cys797, demonstrating a different binding mode used by covalent inhibitors. The C775 and L858 are near the active site, indicating their roles in inhibitor interactions. It was reported that AMPPNP is a form of ATP that cannot be hydrolyzed and linked to the wild-type EGFR due to the later crystal structure; thus, AMPPNP has to form conventional hydrogen bonds with Met793 and Gln791 [21]. This triggers the downstream signaling and cascade of process in the cytoplasm contain cell growth, and apoptosis inhibition [22]. The structure of Afatinib and PD168393, which covalently bind to Cys797 in EGFR, can be seen in Fig. 2B. Afatinib is a second-generation inhibitor that binds irreversibly to EGFR, preventing its activation. PD168393 also binds to the same region of EGFR. As can be seen, Cys797 is highlighted in blue in Fig. 2B, representing the location of the covalent bond between the inhibitors and EGFR. These figures show the direct and stable interaction between the inhibitors and EGFR, which is crucial for treating resistant cancers. The purpose of designing these inhibitors is to block EGFR activation and prevent cancer cell proliferation. Afatinib and PD168393 are especially useful for treating cancers resistant to previous treatments.

Fig. 3. compares different types of EGFR inhibitors according to their generation. Gefitinib and Afatinib are first and second-generation inhibitors that bind reversibly and irreversibly to EGFR, respectively. Second-generation inhibitors feature electrophilic Michael-acceptor groups designed to target a rare cysteine (Cys797) located at the edge of the ATP-binding cleft of EGFR. These new inhibitors are believed to overcome T790M-mediated drug resistance through covalent binding to Cys797, which enhances target residence time and drug efficacy [10].

WZ4002 and Osimertinib are third-generation inhibitors, designed specifically to target specific mutations in EGFR. WZ4002 and Osimertinib, due to their molecular design, are much more effective at binding to Cys797 and blocking EGFR activation. Covalent Inhibitor (COV) and Covalent-Reversible Inhibitors (CRI) are clearly distinguished in Fig. 3. to highlight the fundamental differences between these two types of inhibitors. From Clinical Differences view, COV inhibitors bind permanently to EGFR, blocking its function, while CRI inhibitors can be reversible, which can have specific advantages in treating diseases. These differences may influence treatment choices for patients with cancers that have become resistant to earlier therapies.
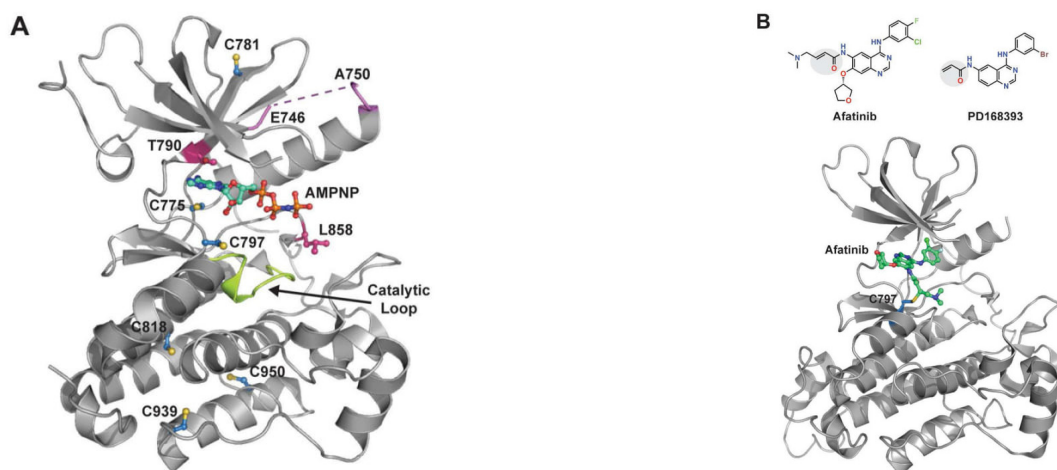

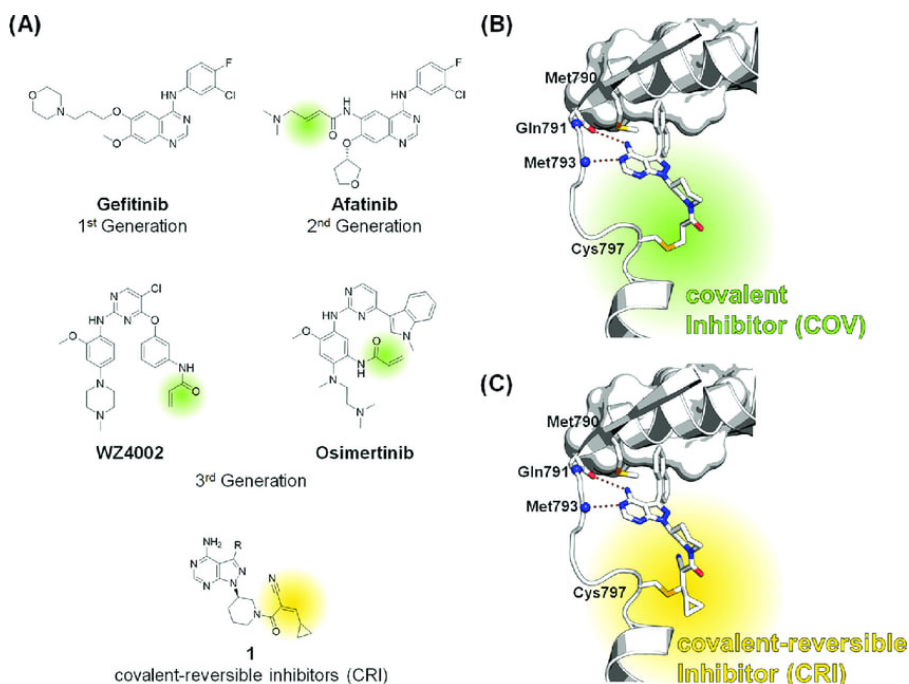**Fig. 2.** EGFR structure and interaction with Afatinib and PD168393.

Fig. 3. Comparison of first, second, and third Generation EGFR Inhibitors.

4. Conclusions

The development and structural analysis of third-generation covalent EGFR inhibitors, such as WZ4002 and Osimertinib, have significantly advanced targeted cancer therapy by overcoming resistance mechanisms associated with earlier treatments. These inhibitors are precisely designed to form covalent bonds with critical residues like Cys797 within the EGFR kinase domain, effectively locking the receptor in an inactive state and disrupting downstream proliferative signaling pathways. Molecular docking studies highlight their high specificity and strong binding affinity, especially against resistant mutations such as T790M, thus exhibiting superior efficacy compared to first- and second-generation agents. The distinction between covalent irreversible and covalent-reversible inhibitors further emphasizes the nuanced approach required for optimizing therapeutic outcomes. Overall, these structural insights underscore the importance of meticulous molecular design in developing next-generation EGFR inhibitors capable of addressing drug resistance and improving clinical responses in EGFR-driven cancers.

Author Contributions

Michael Askari: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author read and approved the final version of manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

No data is available.

Ethical issues

The author confirms full adherence to all ethical guidelines, including the prevention of plagiarism, data fabrication, and double publication.

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