Quality generic products without bioequivalence (BE) assessment – a simple and practical approach! Saeed A. Qureshi, Ph.D. (principal@pharmacomechanics.com)

Considering the weakness (non-specificity) of BE assessments, it is suggested that in vitro drug dissolution/release testing would provide a better alternative to establishing the quality of pharmaceutical products such as tablets and capsules. It is argued that the use of in vitro dissolution test should be the method of choice for developing and monitoring improved or better quality generic products because BE assessment focuses only on equivalence and not on the improvement of the product quality. Other significant advantages of using an appropriate in vitro dissolution test in lieu of BE assessment are described.

Bioequivalence (BE) studies are conducted, which are often a regulatory requirement, to establish quality, and by extension, safety and efficacy, of pharmaceutical (drug/medicinal) products such as tablets and capsules. The BE assessments establish whether two or more products provide the same or similar blood/plasma drug profiles/levels in humans from the tested drug products. The underlying understanding for such assessments is that if two or more products provide the same/similar drug levels, their therapeutic outcome would be the same, i.e., their efficacy and safety would be the same as that of the reference (e.g., innovator's) product. This forms the basis of worldwide regulatory approval of generic products for human use. In reality, it is an assessment to establish drug release characteristics of the products in humans, which leads to the observed plasma drug levels. In this regard, a BE assessment is a typical analytical

test or assessment, however, often referred to as clinical evaluation or test as the analyzed blood samples are from humans. Otherwise, there is practically no difference between such "clinical" evaluations from any other analytical test of average complexity.

An important thing to note is that the BE assessments do not establish the quality, by extension, safety and/or efficacy, of the drug/medicine but only of the drug or medicinal products, i.e., the assessment is only for drug/medicinal products such as tablet and capsule. One has to be clear on this differentiation as confusion exists in literature and in the minds of scientists and practitioners who consider these (drugs/medicines and drug/medicinal products) the same thing. A simple way to differentiate this aspect is by noting that a consumer/patient needs a drug/medicine (often a pure chemical compound) but buys or is prescribed a drug/medicinal product (often a composite of multiple ingredients and the drug/medicine). Therefore, from the quality aspect, a drug product (tablet/capsule) must fulfill consumers'/patients' needs which is - the product must release the drug/medicine from the product as expected, which BE assessment establishes. Thus, for all practical purposes, a BE becomes a quality assessment test for the products and the drug release characteristics as the quality attribute. It is important to keep this thought in mind that BE is in reality a drug release test based on the evaluation of human plasma samples and forms the basis of establishing quality of the products.

www.drug-dissolution-testing.com For simple and practical ideas As for any typical analytical test, to be valid and acceptable, a BE test must also follow some fundamental requirements, which, unfortunately, it does not. For example, a fundamental requirement for any analytical test is that it must be specific and unbiased, which the BE assessment is not! As noted above, the BE test assesses drug release characteristics as reflected by human plasma drug levels, however, the results are confounded with other physiological processes/variables such as stomach emptying and liver metabolism. As explained previously [1], it could be argued that the current BE assessments as conducted or required may not provide accurate drug release characteristics of the products, thus product assessment and/or its quality. It may not be incorrect to say that BE assessment as currently used would be a scientifically invalid test, and its use and/or requirement should be reconsidered.

In addition to the scientific invalidity of this test, it seriously hinders the development of the products with improved quality because a BE test focuses only on providing "equivalent" quality products, not improved or better ones. Thus, with BE assessments, one does not have an option to manufacture improved or better products, no matter how the claims are made.

Considering ethical and large monetary and extended time requirements, drug release assessments are usually conducted using an in vitro test known as drug dissolution test. This in vitro test does not require human subjects and is less expensive, simple, and faster to conduct. This test is conducted because for a drug to be absorbed and appear in plasma, it must be released from the product and dissolved in the GI tract content, in particular intestinal, which is water-based at body temperature having pH around 6. As this (dissolution) test deals only with the drug release characteristics and free from confounded variabilities of physiological factors as noted above for BE assessments, by definition, the test becomes specific and unbiased. Therefore, the test provides a better alternative to human BE assessments.

Unfortunately, the dissolution test as practiced, and required by the regulatory authorities, suffers a serious deficiency which is, it does not provide scientifically valid dissolution results. The recommended testers have never been qualified and/or validated for their intended purpose. In addition, the most commonly recommended testers (paddle/basket) are not capable of providing relevant dissolution results because of their flawed design. If given a blinded tablet or capsule sample, it is impossible to determine the dissolution characteristics of any product.

There is significant scientific literature available indicating poor hydrodynamics within the dissolution vessels and the inability of these testers to provide relevant and predictable dissolution results. On the other hand, if the lack of stirring and mixing (poor hydrodynamics) aspect could be addressed, the drug dissolution testing can become an accurate and relevant dissolution test measuring drug release characteristics of the products. In this regard, a modified stirrer has been suggested providing relevant dissolution characteristics of the product [2, 3]. Thus the practice of BE evaluation may now easily be substituted using an in vitro drug dissolution.

If desired, two simple approaches may be used to complement and/or enhance the credibility of dissolution results about in vivo bioavailability assessment: (1) Plasma drug levels may directly be



Page 2

May 21, 2018

predicted from dissolution data using a suggested convolution method and comparing these predicted results with the ones available in the literature from human studies [4]. (2) Conducting a bioavailability study with the **test product only** and comparing trend of obtained pharmacokinetic parameters with the ones provided in literature.

There are many advantages in conducting such in vitro dissolution studies and establishing the quality of products: (1) one can determine accurate and unbiased dissolution characteristics of the products; (2) one does not require reference products, which are often difficult to obtain, to conduct comparative BE studies to evaluate the test products; (3) It provides the ability to manufacturers and the regulatory authorities to independently develop and regulate better quality generic products not just equivalent. (4) The drug manufacturing and evaluation process would become significantly simpler and efficient, thus saving time and money for their development.

If you would like to have further information or discussion on the topic, please do not hesitate to contact me by sending an email at principal@pharmacomechanics.com.

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