Review Article

Biosimilar insulins in diabetes management: A cost-effective shift in therapeutic options

Supriya Patel

Department of Pharmacy, Government College of Pharmacy, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

Correspondence:
Dr. Supriya Patel, Government College of Pharmacy, Aurangabad - 431001, Maharashtra, India.
E-mail: mesupriyapatel@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Insulin therapy has been crucial in diabetes management since the 1920s. The emergence of biosimilar insulins, developed after the patent expiration of original insulin analogs, represents a major shift in diabetes care. These biosimilars are highly similar to their reference products in terms of safety, efficacy, and immunogenicity. Current biosimilar formulations, including insulin glargine, insulin lispro, and insulin aspart, have shown comparable clinical outcomes to their originator counterparts while offering cost-effective alternatives that improve patient access to treatment. Regulatory bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency require rigorous evaluation of biosimilars to ensure their safety and efficacy, including analytical, preclinical, and clinical studies. Biosimilar insulins are expected to reduce insulin therapy costs and enhance market competition, further driving innovation in diabetes management. Real-world studies and clinical trials confirm that biosimilar insulins perform equivalently to reference insulins in terms of glycemic control and safety profiles. Despite the complexities of regulatory pathways, the development of biosimilar insulins holds significant promise for the future of diabetes treatment by offering affordable and effective therapeutic options.

Keywords: Biosimilar insulins, biosimilarity, clinical efficacy, diabetes management, insulin aspart, insulin glargine, insulin lispro, market impact, regulatory pathways, safety

Introduction

Insulin therapy has been a cornerstone in the management of diabetes since the 1920s, evolving from crude animal extracts to modern recombinant DNA technology that produces highly purified human insulin. This evolution has significantly improved the quality and efficacy of diabetes treatment, allowing for tailored insulin regimens that mimic physiological insulin secretion patterns. Today, patients have access to a variety of insulin formulations, including rapid-acting, long-acting, and combination insulins, which are designed to meet individual metabolic needs and lifestyle requirements.[1]

Emergence of Biosimilar Insulins

The expiration of patents for several first-generation insulin analogs has paved the way for the development of biosimilar insulins. Biosimilars are biologic medical products highly similar to already approved reference products, differing in minor ways that do not affect their safety or efficacy. The introduction of biosimilar insulins is expected to enhance competition in the insulin market, potentially lowering costs and improving access for patients who struggle with the high prices of original biologics. However, the regulatory landscape for biosimilars is complex, with varying standards across different regions, necessitating rigorous clinical evaluation to ensure their equivalence to reference products.[2]

Purpose and Scope of the Review

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current formulations of biosimilar insulins, their regulatory pathways, and their impact on the diabetes market. By examining the development, manufacturing processes, and clinical implications of biosimilar insulins, this article seeks to inform healthcare professionals and stakeholders about the potential benefits and challenges associated with these products.

Current Formulations of Biosimilar Insulins

Biosimilar insulins, such as insulin glargine (Semglee®) and insulin lispro, have received approval in various markets. These products

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are developed to closely mimic the pharmacokinetic (PK) and pharmacodynamics (PD) profiles of their reference insulins, ensuring similar therapeutic outcomes. For instance, Semglee® has been recognized as the first interchangeable biosimilar insulin approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which allows it to be substituted for the reference product without the intervention of the healthcare provider.[3]

Regulatory Pathways and Market Impact

The approval of biosimilar insulins involves a rigorous regulatory process to demonstrate biosimilarity through extensive analytical, preclinical, and clinical studies. Regulatory bodies such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the US FDA have established guidelines that require biosimilars to meet high standards of quality, safety, and efficacy. This regulatory scrutiny is crucial, as the manufacturing processes for biologics are complex and can vary significantly between products, potentially affecting their performance and safety profiles.[4]

The market impact of biosimilar insulins is significant, particularly in regions where insulin access is limited due to high costs. The introduction of biosimilars is expected to reduce insulin prices by 20–40%, making these essential medications more accessible to patients worldwide. Increased competition from biosimilars may also encourage innovation and the development of new insulin formulations, further enhancing treatment options for diabetes management.[5]

The emergence of biosimilar insulins represents a pivotal shift in diabetes management, offering the potential for improved access and affordability of insulin therapy. As the regulatory landscape continues to evolve, it is essential for healthcare professionals to stay informed about the developments in biosimilar technology and their implications for clinical practice. Future research and post-marketing surveillance will be crucial to ensure the ongoing safety and efficacy of biosimilar insulins in diverse patient populations.[6]

This review highlights the importance of understanding biosimilars not just as alternatives to original biologics but as integral components of modern diabetes care that can enhance patient outcomes and quality of life.

Understanding Biosimilars

Definition and characteristics of biosimilar drugs

A biosimilar is a biological medicine that is highly similar to an already approved biological product, known as the reference or originator biologic. The key characteristics of biosimilars include their structural and functional similarity to the reference product in terms of efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity. Biosimilars are typically large, complex molecules produced through biotechnological processes involving living organisms, such as microorganisms or cell cultures. Due to the complexity of biologics, biosimilars cannot be exact replicas of their reference counterparts; instead, they must demonstrate no clinically meaningful differences in safety, purity, and potency through rigorous analytical and clinical studies.[1]

Differences between biosimilars and originator biologics

The primary differences between biosimilars and originator biologics stem from their manufacturing processes. While originator biologics are developed using proprietary methods and have a specific patent protection, biosimilars are produced after the patent expiration of the original product and must adhere to strict regulatory standards to demonstrate their similarity. Unlike generic drugs, which are chemically synthesized and can be exact copies of their reference products, biosimilars are subject to inherent variability due to the biological processes used in their production. This variability means that even minor changes in the manufacturing process can lead to differences in the final product, necessitating comprehensive characterization and evaluation to ensure that the biosimilar is as safe and effective as the reference product.[7]

Regulatory Guidelines for Biosimilar Approval

Regulatory guidelines for biosimilar approval are established by various health authorities, including the US FDA and the EMA. These guidelines require a step-wise approach to demonstrate biosimilarity through extensive analytical, preclinical, and clinical studies. The FDA defines a biosimilar as a biological product that is "highly similar" to a reference product, with no clinically meaningful differences in terms of safety and efficacy, despite minor differences in inactive components.

The approval process typically involves

1. Analytical studies: Detailed comparisons of the biosimilar and reference product's physicochemical properties and biological activity
2. Preclinical studies: Animal studies to assess toxicity and PKs
3. Clinical studies: Human trials to evaluate immunogenicity and other clinical outcomes, although the extent of clinical data required can vary based on the degree of similarity demonstrated in earlier studies.

The EMA has similar requirements, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive comparability exercise to establish similarity in quality characteristics, biological activity, safety, and efficacy. The regulatory frameworks are evolving, with many countries adopting guidelines based on the FDA and EMA standards, ensuring that biosimilars meet high quality, safety, and efficacy standards before entering the market.

The Development of Biosimilar Insulins

History and milestones in biosimilar insulin development

The development of biosimilar insulins has been a gradual process, building on the significant advancements in insulin therapy over the past century. Key milestones include:

- 1922: Insulin was first used to treat a patient with diabetes, marking the beginning of insulin therapy
- 1978: Recombinant DNA technology was used to produce the first genetically engineered "human" insulin in *Escherichia coli*
- 1996: Insulin lispro, a rapid-acting insulin analog, received approval in the US
- 2000: Insulin glargine, a long-acting insulin analog, was approved by the US FDA
- 2009: Biocon launched a biosimilar insulin glargine (Basalog) in India, offering a basal insulin analog option to patients
- 2016: A biosimilar insulin glargine from Biocon was approved and launched in Japan, becoming the first biosimilar from an Indian company to be approved in Japan.

Comparison with traditional insulins

Biosimilar insulins are highly similar to their reference insulin products in terms of quality, safety, and efficacy. However, they are not exact copies due to the inherent variability in the biological manufacturing processes. Traditional insulins, such as those derived from animal sources or early recombinant human insulins, have been gradually replaced by insulin analogs and biosimilars that offer improved PK properties and reduced immunogenicity.

Key players in the biosimilar insulin market

- Biocon biologics: An Indian biopharmaceutical company that has been at the forefront of developing affordable biosimilar insulins, including insulin glargine and insulin aspart
- Mylan: A global pharmaceutical company that has partnered with Biocon to co-develop biosimilar insulin analogs for global markets
- Eli Lilly: A major pharmaceutical company that has developed biosimilar versions of insulin lispro and insulin glargine
- Sanofi: A multinational pharmaceutical company that has been actively involved in the development and commercialization of biosimilar insulins.

Regulatory approval pathways for biosimilar insulins (FDA, EMA, etc.)

Regulatory agencies such as the US FDA and the EMA have established guidelines for the approval of biosimilar insulins. The approval process typically involves:

1. Analytical studies: Detailed comparisons of the biosimilar and reference product's physicochemical properties and biological activity
2. Preclinical studies: Animal studies to assess toxicity and PKs
3. Clinical studies: Human trials to evaluate immunogenicity and other clinical outcomes, although the extent of clinical data required can vary based on the degree of similarity demonstrated in earlier studies.

The EMA requires that clinical studies of at least 12 months' duration using subcutaneous administration are conducted to collect safety and immunogenicity data, with a comparative phase of at least 6 months' duration to be completed before market authorization. PK and PD studies are also key to demonstrating comparability.

The approval of biosimilar insulins follows detailed regulatory pathways derived from those of their reference products, ensuring that they meet high standards of quality, safety, and efficacy.

Current Biosimilar Insulin Formulations

Insulin glargine biosimilars

Insulin glargine biosimilars have emerged as significant alternatives to the originator product, Lantus. The most notable among these is Semglee®, developed by Biocon and Viatris, which became the first interchangeable biosimilar insulin approved by the US FDA. Semglee® is designed to have a similar PK and PD profile to Lantus, ensuring comparable efficacy and safety for patients with diabetes. Other biosimilars include Abasaglar®, which is marketed in Europe and has also shown similar clinical outcomes to the reference product.[8]

Insulin lispro biosimilars

Biosimilars of insulin lispro, such as Admelog® and Lyumjev®, have been introduced to provide rapid-acting insulin options. These formulations aim to replicate the action profile of the original humalog insulin, allowing for improved postprandial glucose control. Clinical studies have demonstrated that these biosimilars offer similar efficacy and safety profiles, making them viable alternatives for patients requiring rapid-acting insulin therapy.[7]

Insulin aspart biosimilars

Insulin aspart biosimilars, such as Nexviazyme®, have also entered the market, providing another option for patients needing rapid-acting insulin. These biosimilars are designed to mimic the pharmacological effects of the original insulin aspart, with studies indicating comparable effectiveness and safety. The availability of these biosimilars is particularly important in addressing the rising costs of insulin therapy, as they typically offer a more affordable alternative to their reference products.[1]

Emerging biosimilar insulin formulations

The biosimilar insulin market continues to evolve, with several new formulations in development. Companies are exploring biosimilars for other insulin analogs and even newer formulations that may offer enhanced properties, such as improved stability or longer duration of action. The ongoing research and development in this area aim to expand patient access to affordable insulin therapies, particularly in regions where high costs have limited treatment options. Regulatory bodies are also working to streamline approval processes for these emerging biosimilars, ensuring they meet the necessary safety and efficacy standards.[2]

The development of biosimilar insulins represents a significant advancement in diabetes management, offering patients more options and potentially lowering the financial burden associated with insulin therapy.

Clinical Efficacy and Safety of Biosimilar Insulins

Clinical trials and studies on biosimilar insulins

Numerous clinical trials have been conducted to evaluate the efficacy and safety of biosimilar insulins compared to their reference products. A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials indicated that there are no clinically significant differences in efficacy, safety, or immunogenicity between biosimilar and originator insulins. The review included trials assessing changes in HbA1c levels, fastin7g plasma glucose, and rates of hypoglycemia, confirming that biosimilar insulins perform similarly to their reference counterparts.[9]

PKs and PDs

PK and PD studies are critical for establishing the biosimilarity of insulin products. These studies typically employ rigorous methodologies, such as euglycemic hyperinsulinemic clamp techniques, to assess the insulin action profile. The EMA and the US FDA have set guidelines that require comprehensive PK/PD assessments to demonstrate that biosimilar insulins exhibit comparable absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion characteristics to their reference insulins.[1]

Safety profiles and immunogenicity concerns

Safety profiles of biosimilar insulins have been closely monitored, particularly regarding immunogenicity. Studies have shown that the incidence of anti-insulin antibodies is comparable between biosimilars and reference insulins, suggesting that the risk of immunogenic reactions is minimal. The EMA requires long-term safety studies, typically lasting at least 12 months, to evaluate potential immunogenicity and overall safety in a real-world setting. The FDA has also indicated that if a biosimilar demonstrates high similarity through analytical assessments, the need for extensive immunogenicity studies may be reduced.[10]

Comparison with reference insulins in real-world settings

Real-world studies further support the findings from clinical trials, showing that biosimilar insulins maintain efficacy and safety profiles comparable to reference insulins. Observational studies have reported similar outcomes in glycemic control and safety events, such as hypoglycemia, across various patient populations using biosimilar insulins.[9] These findings underscore the potential of biosimilars to provide effective and safe alternatives to traditional insulin therapies, particularly in managing healthcare costs and improving patient access to necessary medications.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the clinical efficacy and safety of biosimilar insulins are well-supported by a robust body of evidence from clinical trials and real-world studies, indicating their viability as effective alternatives to reference insulin products.

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