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Opinion Article

Synthetic Biology: Redesigning Living Systems for Medical Applications

Katerina Roussi*

Department of Epidemiology, University of Athens, Athens, Greece

DESCRIPTION

Synthetic biology is an emerging field that combines principles of biology engineering and computer science to redesign living systems for specific applications including medicine. By reprogramming organisms at the genetic and molecular level synthetic biology aims to create new biological parts devices and systems that can perform functions not found in nature. This field compresses excessive capacity for revolutionizing medical treatments creating innovative therapeutic strategies and addressing complex health challenges that have traditionally been difficult to overcome with conventional methods. One of the most exciting medical applications of synthetic biology is in the development of gene therapies. Gene therapy involves modifying a patient's genes to treat or cure diseases such as inherited genetic disorders certain types of cancer or viral infections like HIV. Synthetic biology enables the design of more precise gene-editing tools such as CRISPR-Cas9 which allow scientists to target and modify specific genes with unprecedented accuracy. This ability to directly alter the genetic code holds the potential to correct genetic mutations that cause diseases offering the possibility of permanent cures rather than just symptom management.

For example in sickle cell disease a genetic mutation causes red blood cells to take on a rigid sickle-like shape which leads to pain organ damage and early death. Researchers have explored using synthetic biology techniques to correct this mutation at the DNA level either by directly editing the faulty gene or by introducing a modified gene that produces healthy hemoglobin. Early trials of gene therapies for sickle cell disease have shown capable results with patients experiencing significant improvements in their health demonstrating the potential of synthetic biology to provide long-term solutions to genetic disorders. Synthetic biology also offers exciting possibilities in the creation of synthetic microbes or engineered microorganisms that can be used as living therapeutics. These microbes could be designed to perform a variety of functions from producing beneficial compounds to targeting and destroying harmful pathogens in the body. For instance synthetic bacteria have been engineered to deliver drugs directly to cancer cells minimizing damage to healthy tissue and enhancing the effectiveness of treatments. By designing bacteria that respond to specific tumor markers scientists can create "smart" therapeutics that act only in the presence of the disease reducing side effects and improving treatment outcomes.

Another key area of synthetic biology is the development of tissue engineering and regenerative medicine. Through synthetic biology scientists can design and construct tissues and organs in the laboratory for transplantation or repair. One of the most innovative applications is the use of synthetic biology to create bioengineered tissues that can replace damaged or diseased organs. For example researchers are working on developing lab-grown skin heart valves and even liver tissue that can be used in patients who suffer from burns organ failure or degenerative diseases. By designing scaffolds from biocompatible materials scientists can promote the growth of cells in a controlled environment encouraging the regeneration of functional tissues that are biologically compatible with the patient.

Furthermore synthetic biology can play a pivotal role in the development of vaccines and immune therapies. Synthetic biology techniques allow for the creation of novel vaccine platforms that can be tailored to combat a wide range of infectious diseases. For example during the COVID-19 pandemic mRNA vaccine technology which is rooted in synthetic biology enabled rapid vaccine development. mRNA vaccines instruct cells to produce a protein similar to the virus's spike protein prompting an immune response without the need for live virus exposure. This technology offers a strong foundation for the rapid development of future vaccines against emerging infectious diseases such as influenza Zika or even cancer.

Correspondence to: Katerina Roussi, Department of Epidemiology, University of Athens, Athens, Greece, E-mail: katerioussi@gmail.com

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