

Review

## Liposomes in drug delivery: progress and limitations

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### Abstract

Liposomes are microparticulate lipoidal vesicles which are under extensive investigation as drug carriers for improving the delivery of therapeutic agents. Due to new developments in liposome technology, several liposome-based drug formulations are currently in clinical trial, and recently some of them have been approved for clinical use. Reformulation of drugs in liposomes has provided an opportunity to enhance the therapeutic indices of various agents mainly through alteration in their biodistribution. This review discusses the potential applications of liposomes in drug delivery with examples of formulations approved for clinical use, and the problems associated with further exploitation of this drug delivery system. © 1997 Elsevier Science B.V.

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### 1. Introduction

Recent advances in biomedical science and combinatorial chemistry have resulted in the design and synthesis of hundreds of new agents with potential activity against a wide range of therapeutic targets *in vitro*. However, most of these new drugs fail to live up to their potential in the clinic. For instance, although there are numerous

anticancer agents that are highly cytotoxic to tumor cells *in vitro*, the lack of selective antitumor effect *in vivo* precludes their use in clinic. One of the major limitations of antineoplastic drugs is their low therapeutic index (TI), i.e. the dose required to produce anti-tumor effect is toxic to normal tissues. The low TI of such drugs may be due to: (i) their inability to achieve therapeutic concentrations at the target site (solid tumors); (ii) nonspecific cytotoxicity to critical normal tissues such as bone marrow, renal, GI tract and cardiac tissue; and/or (iii) problems associated with for-

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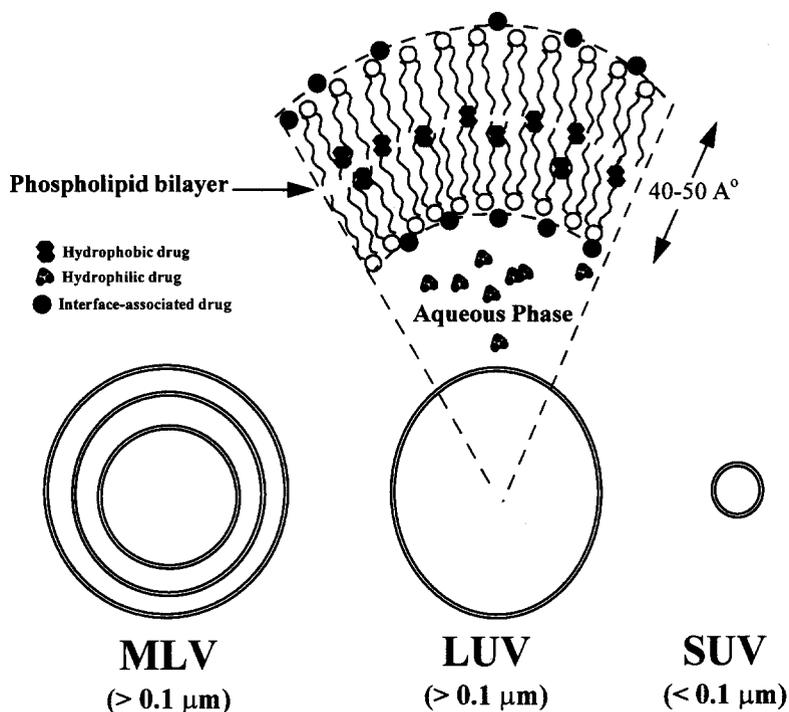


Fig. 1. Types of liposomes depending on size and number of lamellae.

mulation of the drug, for example, low solubility in pharmaceutically suitable vehicles, leading to the use of surfactants or organic co-solvents which have their own undesirable side effects. Thus, there is a need for effective delivery systems that not only act as a formulation aid but alter the biodistribution of drugs in such a way that a greater fraction of the dose reaches the target site.

Liposomes are micro-particulate or colloidal carriers, usually 0.05–5.0 μm in diameter which form spontaneously when certain lipids are hydrated in aqueous media (Bangham and Horne, 1964). Liposomes are composed of relatively biocompatible and biodegradable material, and they consist of an aqueous volume entrapped by one or more bilayers of natural and/or synthetic lipids (Fig. 1). Drugs with widely varying lipophilicities can be encapsulated in liposomes, either in the phospholipid bilayer, in the entrapped aqueous volume or at the bilayer interface (Fig. 1). Liposomes have been investigated as carriers of vari-

ous pharmacologically active agents such as antineoplastic and antimicrobial drugs, chelating agents, steroids, vaccines and genetic material (reviewed by Gregoriadis and Florence, 1993).

Due to recent developments in liposome technology, more effective strategies are now available for controlling the stability and reactivity of liposomes after systemic administration (Lasic and Papahadjopoulos, 1995). On the basis of the ability of liposomes to interact with cells and/or blood components, at least two types of liposomes currently can be designed including: (i) non-interactive sterically stabilized (long-circulating) liposomes (LCL) and; (ii) highly interactive cationic liposomes.

Sterically stabilized liposomes can be formulated by incorporating hydrophilic long-chain polymers in the bilayer which can form a coat on the liposome surface and repel opsonin penetration and adsorption. Reduction in 'marking' by opsonins leads to slower uptake of these liposomes (LCL) by the cells of reticuloendothelial

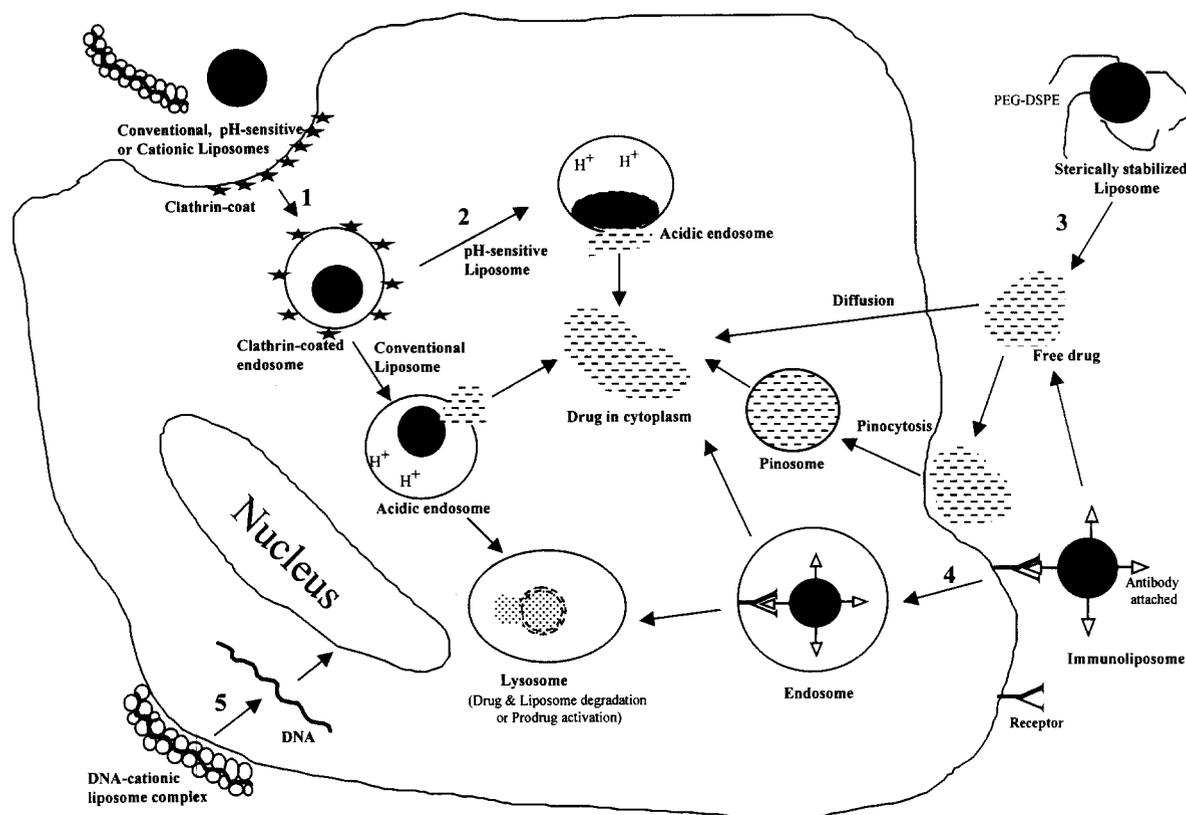


Fig. 2. Predominant mechanisms of intracellular drug delivery by liposomes. The different pathways are indicated by numbers: 1-coated pit endocytosis of conventional, pH-sensitive and cationic liposomes; 2-release of drug in the acidic endosome by pH-sensitive liposomes; 3-intravascular and/or extracellular drug release from long circulating liposomes; 4-receptor mediated endocytosis of immunoliposomes; 5-fusion of cationic liposomes with plasma membrane.

system (RES). Thus, LCL exhibit extended circulation half-life compared to the so-called 'conventional liposomes' (CL) because of their reduced recognition and uptake by the RES. Furthermore, LCL can be designed to exhibit specific interaction with target cells by attaching target specific ligands.

In contrast to LCL, cationic liposomes exhibit high affinity to cell membranes and can be used to deliver exogenous genetic material intracellularly via fusion with the cell membranes (Felgner et al., 1994). Cationic liposome formulations provide a promising non-viral delivery system for transfection of cells by exogenous plasmids, RNA and oligonucleotides.

## 2. Classification of liposomes

### 2.1. On the basis of composition

Liposomes are composed of natural and/or synthetic lipids (phospho- and sphingo-lipids), and may also contain other bilayer constituents such as cholesterol and hydrophilic polymer conjugated lipids. The net physicochemical properties of the lipids composing the liposomes, such as membrane fluidity, charge density, steric hindrance, and permeability, determine liposomes' interactions with blood components and other tissues after systemic administration. The nature and extent of liposome-cell interaction in turn determines the mode of intracellular delivery of

drugs. Thus, the predominant mechanism behind intracellular delivery of drugs by liposomes may mainly depend on their composition, as depicted in Fig. 2.

Liposomes can be classified in terms of composition and mechanism of intracellular delivery into five types as: (i) conventional liposomes (CL); (ii) pH-sensitive liposomes; (iii) cationic liposomes; (iv) immunoliposomes; and (v) long-circulating liposomes (LCL). The typical composition and characteristics for these types of liposomes are listed in Table 1.

### 2.2. *On the basis of size*

The liposome size can range from very small (0.025  $\mu\text{m}$ ) to large (2.5  $\mu\text{m}$ ) vesicles. Furthermore, liposomes may have single or multiple bilayer membranes (Fig. 1). The vesicle size is a critical parameter in determining circulation half-life of liposomes, and both size and number of bilayers influence the extent of drug encapsulation in the liposomes.

On the basis of their size and number of bilayers, liposomes can also be classified into one of three categories: (i) multilamellar vesicles (MLV); (ii) large unilamellar vesicles (LUV); and (iii) small unilamellar vesicles (SUV). The size and characteristics of these types of liposomes are listed in Table 2.

## 3. Parameters which influence in vivo behavior of liposomes

Liposome formulations of various drugs can be optimized in terms of drug content, stability, desirable biodistribution patterns, and cellular uptake by altering their physicochemical parameters. These parameters include fluidity of bilayer membrane, surface charge density, surface hydration, and size (Straubinger et al., 1993). The effects of these parameters on the physical and biological performance of liposomes are described below.

### 3.1. *Bilayer fluidity*

Lipids have a characteristic phase transition temperature ( $T_c$ ), and they exist in different phys-

ical states above and below the  $T_c$ . The lipids are in a rigid, well-ordered arrangement ('Solid' gel-like phase) below the  $T_c$ , and in a liquid-crystalline ('Fluid') phase above the  $T_c$ . The fluidity of liposome bilayers can be altered by using phospholipids with different  $T_c$  which in turn can vary from  $-20$  to  $90^\circ\text{C}$  depending upon the length and nature (saturated or unsaturated) of the fatty acid chains. Presence of high  $T_c$  lipids ( $T_c > 37^\circ\text{C}$ ) makes the liposome bilayer membrane less fluid at the physiological temperature and less leaky. In contrast, liposomes composed of low  $T_c$  lipids ( $T_c < 37^\circ\text{C}$ ) are more susceptible to leakage of drugs encapsulated in aqueous phase at physiological temperatures. The fluidity of bilayers may also influence the interaction of liposomes with cells: liposomes composed of high  $T_c$  lipid appear to have a lower extent of uptake by RES, compared to those containing low  $T_c$  lipid (Gabizon and Papahadjopoulos, 1988). Incorporation of cholesterol into lipid bilayer can also affect the fluidity of the membranes. At high concentrations ( $> 30$  molar %), cholesterol can totally eliminate phase transition and decrease the membrane fluidity at a temperature  $> T_c$ , which makes the liposomes more stable and less leaky after systemic administration.

### 3.2. *Surface charge*

The nature and density of charge on the liposome surface are important parameters which influence the mechanism and extent of liposome-cell interaction. Both of these parameters can be altered by changing the lipid composition. Lack of surface charge can reduce physical stability of small unilamellar liposomes (SUV) by increasing their aggregation (Sharma and Straubinger, 1994). Moreover, neutral liposomes do not interact significantly with cells, and in such cases, the drug may mainly enter cells after being released from liposomes extracellularly (Sharma et al., 1993a).

On the other hand, high electrostatic surface charge could promote liposome-cell interaction. It has been shown that negatively charged liposomes are predominantly taken up by cells through coated-pit endocytosis (Straubinger et al.,

Table 1  
Liposome classification based on composition and mode of drug delivery

Type	Composition	Characteristics
Conventional liposomes (CL)	Neutral and/or negatively charged phospholipids plus Chol	Subject to coated-pit endocytosis; contents ultimately delivered to lysosomes, if they do not diffuse from the endosome; useful for RES targeting; rapid and saturable uptake by RES; short circulation half-life; dose-dependent pharmacokinetics (PK)
pH-sensitive liposomes	Phospholipid such as PE or DOPE with either CHEMS or OA	Subject to coated-pit endocytosis; at low pH, fuse with cell or endosome membranes and release their contents in cytoplasm; suitable for intracellular delivery of weak bases and macromolecules; biodistribution and PK similar to CL
Cationic liposomes	Cationic lipids: DDAB, DOGS, DOSPA, DOTAP, DOTMA, DMRJE, and DORIE with DOPE	Possibly fuse with cell or endosome membranes; suitable for delivery of negatively charged macromolecules (DNA, RNA, oligos); ease of formulation; structurally unstable; transfection activity decreases with time; toxic at high doses; mainly restricted to local administration
Long-circulating liposomes (LCL)	Neutral high $T_c$ lipids, Chol. plus 5–10% of PEG-DSPE, GM1 or HPI; $\leq 0.1 \mu\text{m}$ in size	Hydrophilic surface coating; low opsonization and thus low rate of uptake by RES; long circulation half-life ( $\approx 40$ h); dose-independent PK upto $10 \mu\text{mol}/\text{mouse}$ lipid dose
Immuno-liposomes	CL or LCL with attached antibody or recognition sequence	Subject to receptor-mediated endocytosis; cell-specific binding (targeting); can release contents extracellularly near the target tissue and drugs may diffuse through plasma membrane to produce their effects

Table 2  
Liposome classification by size and number of lamellae

Type	Usual size	Characteristics
MLV (Multilamellar vesicles)	>0.1 $\mu\text{m}$	More than one bilayer; moderate aqueous volume to lipid ratio (1–4 l/mole lipid); greater encapsulation of lipophilic drugs; mechanically stable upon long term storage; rapidly cleared by RES; useful for targeting the cells of RES; simplest to prepare; prepared by thin-film hydration method or hydration of lipids in presence of an organic solvent.
LUV (Large unilamellar vesicles)	>0.1 $\mu\text{m}$	Single bilayer high aqueous volume to lipid ratio (7 l/mole lipid); useful for hydrophilic drugs; high capture of macromolecules; rapidly cleared by RES; prepared by detergent dialysis, ether injection, reverse-phase evaporation (REV) or 'active loading' methods.
SUV (Small unilamellar vesicles)	$\leq 0.1 \mu\text{m}$	Single bilayer; homogenous in size; thermodynamically unstable; susceptible to aggregation and fusion at low or no charge; limited capture of macromolecules; low aqueous volume to lipid ratio (0.2–1.5 l/mole lipid); long circulation half-life; prepared by reducing the size of MLV or LUV using probe sonicator or gas extruder, or by 'active loading' or solvent injection techniques.

1983) as depicted in Fig. 2. Studies have also shown that negative charge density influences the extent of liposome interaction with cells (Sharma et al., 1993a). Negative surface charge may not only increase intracellular uptake of liposomes by target cells but by the same mechanism accelerate their plasma clearance after systemic administration (Gabizon et al., 1990). Negatively charged liposomes may also release their contents in the circulation and/or extracellularly after interaction with blood components and tissues. Unlike negatively charged liposomes, cationic liposomes have been proposed to deliver contents to cells by fusion with cell membranes (Felgner et al., 1994).

### 3.3. Surface hydration

Inclusion of a small fraction (5–10 mole%) of compounds bearing hydrophilic groups such as monosialoganglioside ( $G_{M1}$ ), hydrogenated phosphatidylinositol (HPI) and polyethylene glycol conjugated with lipid (PEG-DSPE), in the bilayer membrane reduces the interaction of liposomes with cells and blood components and makes liposomes sterically stabilized (Allen and Chonn, 1987; Allen et al., 1985; Gabizon and Papahadjopoulos, 1988; Papahadjopoulos et al., 1991). As mentioned earlier, the presence of hydrophilic surface coating offers steric hindrance to opsonin adsorption on bilayer which further reduces the rate of liposome uptake by the cells of RES (Allen et al., 1991). Thus, the sterically stabilized liposomes are more stable in biological environment and can exhibit up to 10-fold higher circulation half-lives than liposomes without hydrophilic surface coating (Klibanov et al., 1991; Lasic et al., 1991).

### 3.4. Liposome size

Liposome size is one of the main parameters which determines the fraction cleared by the RES (Harashima et al., 1994). Small liposomes ( $\leq 0.1 \mu\text{m}$ ) are opsonized less rapidly and to a lower extent compared to large liposomes ( $> 0.1 \mu\text{m}$ ) and therefore, the rate of liposome uptake by RES increases with the size of the vesicles. Reduc-

tion in liposome size has also been correlated with increased accumulation in tumor tissue. This may partly be due to longer circulation half-life of small liposomes compared to large liposomes. In addition, small liposomes can extravasate by passive convective transport through the tumor capillaries much more easily than large liposomes. Tumor capillaries are generally more permeable than normal capillaries and fluid can leak through gaps in the vasculature along with plasma proteins, other macromolecules and microparticulates such as liposomes. Extravasation of liposomes depends on their size and occurs passively; the driving force behind this is the difference between intravascular hydrostatic and interstitial pressures (Yuan et al., 1994). Liposome size can be reduced by sonication, extrusion, or microfluidization of MLV or LUV.

### 3.5. Method of preparation

Liposomes of different sizes and characteristics usually require different methods of preparation. The most simple and widely used method for preparation of MLV is the thin-film hydration procedure in which a thin film of lipids is hydrated with an aqueous buffer at a temperature above the transition temperature of lipids. The drug to be encapsulated is included either in the aqueous hydration buffer (for hydrophilic drugs) or in the lipid film (for lipophilic drugs). Thin-film hydration method produces a heterogeneous population of MLV ( $1\text{--}5 \mu\text{m}$  diameter) which can be sonicated or extruded through polycarbonate filters to produce small (up to  $0.025 \mu\text{m}$ ) and more uniformly sized population of SUV.

Although thin-film hydration is a simple technique, one of the major disadvantages of this method is its relatively poor encapsulation efficiency (5–15%) of hydrophilic drugs. Moreover, reduction of liposome size further decreases the amount of encapsulated drug. MLV with high entrapment efficiency (up to 40%) can be prepared by freeze-drying preformed SUV dispersion in an aqueous solution of the drug to be encapsulated (Ohsawa et al., 1984). The encapsulation effi-

ciency of MLV can also be increased by hydrating lipid in the presence of an organic solvent (Papahadjopoulos and Watkins, 1967; Gruner et al., 1985).

Several methods have been developed for the preparation of large, unilamellar vesicles (LUV), including solvent (ether or ethanol) injection, detergent dialysis, calcium induced fusion, and reverse-phase evaporation (REV) techniques. SUV can be prepared from MLV or LUV by sonication (using probe sonicator) or extrusion (passage through a small orifice under high pressure).

In the methods described above, an amphiphilic ionizable drug which exhibits lipophilic and hydrophilic properties depending on the pH of the solution, may not be encapsulated with high efficiency because the drug molecules can diffuse in and out of the lipid membrane. Thus, the drug would be difficult to retain inside liposomes. However, these type of drugs can be encapsulated into preformed liposomes with high efficiency (up to 90%) using the 'active loading' technique (Clerc and Barenholz, 1995). In the 'active loading' method, the pH in the liposome interior is such that the unionized drug which enters the liposome by passive diffusion is ionized inside the liposome, and ionized drug molecules accumulate in the liposome interior in high concentrations due to their inability to diffuse out through the lipid bilayer. For example, doxorubicin and epirubicin may be entrapped in preformed SUV with high efficacy using 'active loading' methods (Mayer et al., 1990; Mayhew et al., 1992).

For a detailed review of methods of liposome preparation see Szoka and Papahadjopoulos (1980), Deamer and Uster (1980); Martin (1990) and New (1990).

#### 4. Applications of liposomes in drug delivery

New drug delivery systems such as liposomes are developed when an existing formulation is not satisfactory and reformulation offers superior therapeutic efficacy and safety over the existing formulation. Indeed, liposome formulations of some drugs have shown a significant increase in therapeutic efficacy and/or therapeutic indices in

preclinical models and in humans, compared to their non-liposomal formulations. The therapeutic applications of liposomes generally fall into several categories briefly described below.

##### 4.1. Formulation aid

Hydrophobic drugs such as cyclosporin and paclitaxel are usually formulated in surfactants and organic co-solvents for systemic administration in humans. These solubilizers may cause toxicity at the doses needed to deliver the drug. In contrast, liposomes are made up of lipids which are relatively non-toxic, non-immunogenic, biocompatible and biodegradable molecules, and can encapsulate a broad range of water-insoluble (lipophilic) drugs. Currently, liposomes or phospholipid mixtures are being used as excipients for preparing better-tolerated preclinical and clinical formulations of several lipophilic, poorly water-soluble drugs such as amphotericin B. In preclinical studies, liposomes have been evaluated as a vehicle for the delivery of paclitaxel and its analogs as an alternative to the cremophor/ethanol vehicle (Sharma, 1994; Sharma et al., 1993; 1995). Paclitaxel liposomes were able to deliver the drug systemically and increase the therapeutic index of paclitaxel in human ovarian tumor models (Sharma et al., 1997, 1995).

##### 4.2. Intracellular drug delivery

Drugs with intracellular targets/receptors are required to cross the plasma membrane for pharmacological activity. Liposomes can be used to increase cytosolic delivery of certain drugs such as *N*-(phosphonacetyl)-L-aspartate (PALA) which are normally poorly taken up into cells (Heath and Brown, 1989–1990). PALA is taken up into the tumor cells through fluid-phase endocytosis (pinocytosis) and it diffuses out into the cytoplasm as the endosome pH drops (White and Hines, 1984). However, pinocytosis is very limited in its efficiency. Liposomal delivery of drugs which normally enter the cells by pinocytosis can be very effective (Sharma, 1994) because liposomes can contain greater concentrations of drug compared to the extracellular fluid and the endo-

cytosis process by which negatively charged liposomes are predominantly taken up by the cells, is more efficient than pinocytosis. For example, the potency of PALA encapsulated liposomes was up to 500-fold greater against human ovarian tumor cell lines than that of free PALA (Sharma et al., 1993a).

#### 4.3. Sustained release drug delivery

Sustained release systems are required for drugs such as cytosine arabinoside (Ara-C) that are rapidly cleared in vivo and require plasma concentrations at therapeutic levels for a prolonged period for optimum pharmacological effects. It is now possible to design sustained release liposome formulations with an extended circulation half-life and an optimized drug release rate in vivo. For example, Ara-C encapsulated in LCL is effective as a prolonged release system in the treatment of murine L1210/C2 leukemia (Allen et al., 1992). Conventional liposomes which localize by phagocytosis in the cells of RES may also act as a sustained release depot by slowly leaking drugs from RES into the general circulation.

#### 4.4. Gene therapy

A number of systemic diseases are caused by lack of enzymes/factors which are due to missing or defective genes. In recent years, several attempts have been made to restore gene expression by delivery of the relevant exogenous DNA or genes to cells (reviewed by Crystal, 1995). Cationic liposomes (Table 1) have been considered as potential non-viral human gene delivery system (Felgner et al., 1987; Felgner and Ringold, 1989; Felgner et al., 1995; Gao and Huang, 1995). They are usually composed of a cationic lipid derivative and a neutral phospholipid (DOPE). The latter is required by certain cationic lipids to form stable liposomes. Some of the widely used cationic liposome formulations are: lipofectin (DOTMA:DOPE, 1:1); lipofectamine (DOSPA:DOPE, 3:1); transfectace (DDAB:DOPE, 1:3); cytofectin (DMRIE:DOPE); transfectam (DOGS) and DC-cholesterol. The negatively charged genetic material (e.g., plasmid) is not encapsulated

in liposomes but complexed with cationic lipids by electrostatic interactions. Plasmid–liposome complexes are thought to enter the cell by fusion with the plasma or endosome membrane (Fig. 2).

Allovectin-7, a gene transfer product is currently in clinical trials (phase I/II) as an immunotherapeutic agent for the treatment of metastatic melanoma, renal cell and colorectal carcinoma (Table 3). Allovectin-7 is composed of a plasmid containing the gene for the major histocompatibility complex antigen HLA-B7 with  $\beta$ -2 microglobulin formulated with the cytofectin (DMRIE:DOPE). The ongoing clinical trials have indicated that intralesional injection of Allovectin-7 can be performed safely and have demonstrated antitumor activity in some patients (Nabel et al., 1995).

Plasmid–liposome complexes have many advantages as gene transfer vehicles over viral-based vectors (Crystal, 1995): (i) these complexes are relatively nonimmunogenic because they lack proteins; (ii) liposomes or lipid complexes can be used for transfection of large-sized genetic material; and (iii) viruses, unlike plasmid–liposome complexes, may replicate and cause infections. However, there are several problems limiting the application of liposomes as a gene delivery system. Some of these problems are discussed in the Section Section 5.5.

#### 4.5. Site-avoidance delivery

Drugs used in the treatment of diseases like cancer usually have a narrow therapeutic index (TI) and can be highly toxic to normal tissues. The toxicity of these drugs may be minimized by decreasing delivery to critical normal organs. It has been shown that even a small reduction in distribution of the drug to critical organs by encapsulation in liposomes can significantly reduce the drug toxicity (Szoka, 1991). Liposomes are taken up poorly by tissues such as heart, kidney, and GI tract, which are major sites for toxic side-effects of a variety of antineoplastic drugs. Thus, liposome formulation may improve the TI by altering the biodistribution of drug away from drug sensitive normal tissues. For

Table 3  
Liposome and lipid-based products in clinical trials in USA

Product	Drug	Formulation	Company	Status	Indication/Target
Allovecin-7	HLA-B7 plasmid	DNA-lipid complex (intralesional injection)	Vical Inc., San Diego, CA	Phase II	Gene therapy of metastatic cancers
				Phase I	Gene therapy of metastatic renal cancer with concurrent IL-2
AmBisome™	AmB(a)	Liposomes	NeXstar Pharmaceutical, Inc., Boulder, CO	Pending approval(b)	Life-threatening systemic fungal infection; visceral leishmaniasis
Amphotec™	AmB	Lipid complex	Sequus Pharmaceutical, Inc, Menlo Park, CA	Phase III	Life-threatening systemic fungal infection in immunocompromised patients
Annamycin	Annamycin	Liposomes	Aronex Pharmaceuticals, The Woodlands, TX	Phase I/II	Breast cancer
Atragen™	Tretinoin	Liposomes	Aronex Pharmaceuticals, The Woodlands, TX	Phase II/III	Kaposi's sarcoma in AIDS
				Phase II	Recurrent acute promyelocytic leukemia
Doxil™	Doxorubicin	Liposomes	Sequus Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Menlo Park, CA	Phase I	Cancer of blood
				Phase III	Refractory ovarian, recurrent breast and prostate cancers
Nyotran™	Nystatin	Liposomes	Aronex Pharmaceuticals, The Woodlands, TX	Phase II/III	Candidemia
				Phase I	Comparative study against AmB in suspected fungal infection
TLC-D99	Doxorubicin	Liposomes	The Liposome Company, Princeton, NJ	Phase III	Metastatic breast cancer
Ventus™	Prostaglandin E1	Liposomes	The Liposome Company, Princeton, NJ	Phase III	Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome

<sup>a</sup> Amphotericin B; <sup>b</sup>NDA filed with United State Food and Drug Administration.

instance, free amphotericin B and doxorubicin produce severe dose-limiting nephrotoxicity and cardiac toxicity, respectively. Reformulation of these drugs in liposomes results in reduced toxicity with no change in therapeutic efficacy. Liposome formulations of amphotericin B and doxorubicin have now been approved for clinical use (Table 4).

#### 4.6. Site-specific targeting

Site-specific delivery, the concept first proposed by Paul Ehrlich (Ehrlich, 1906) involves the delivery of a larger fraction of drug to the target site and therefore, reducing exposure to normal tissues. Liposomes have been employed for accomplishing both passive and active targeting of drugs.

Table 4  
Liposome and lipid-based products approved for human use

Product	drug	Formulation	Company	Indication/target	Country
Doxil™ <sup>(a)</sup>	Doxorubicin	Liposomes (LCL)	Sequus Pharmaceuticals, Inc., CA	Kaposi sarcoma in AIDS	USA and Europe
Ambisome™	Amphotericin B	Liposomes (CL)	NeXstar Pharmaceutical, Inc., CO	Serious fungal infections	Around the world in 24 countries
DaunoX-ome™	Daunorubicin citrate	Liposomes (LCL)	NeXstar Pharmaceutical, Inc., CO	Kaposi sarcoma in AIDS	USA and Europe
Amphocil™	Amphotericin B	Lipid complex	Sequus Pharmaceutical, Inc., CA	Serious fungal infections	Asia and Europe
Abelcet™	Amphotericin B	Lipid complex	The Liposome Company, NJ	Serious fungal infections	USA and Europe

<sup>a</sup> Marketed as Caelyx™ in Europe.

#### 4.6.1. Passive targeting

This approach for liposome drug delivery exploits the natural tendency of certain cells such as Kupffer cells in the liver, and circulating macrophages of RES to phagocytose foreign microparticulates such as liposomes. Conventional liposome (CL) formulations of drugs and immunostimulators have been successfully used for targeting the cells of RES, and exhibit significant improvement in the TI of the drugs (reviewed by Alving, 1991). In clinical trials, systemic administration of CL containing muramyl peptide derivatives caused enhancement in the tumoricidal properties of monocytes in patients with recurrent osteosarcoma (reviewed by Killion and Fidler, 1994). Liposomes have also been used to enhance the antigenicity of certain molecules for new vaccine formulations (Section Section 4.8). Furthermore, CLs have also been employed for targeting of immunosuppressive drugs to lymphatic tissues such as the spleen. In a preclinical model, an increase in immunosuppressive activity, i.e. a delay in heart transplant rejection was observed with CL-encapsulated methylprednisolone (Binder et al., 1994).

#### 4.6.2. Active targeting

Active targeting of liposome encapsulated drugs may be accomplished by coupling specific antibodies to vesicles (immunoliposomes). Immunoliposomes containing diphtherin toxin (DT) have been shown to provide protection against the

non-specific toxicity of DT during cancer chemotherapy (Vingerhoeds et al., 1996). Long-circulating immunoliposomes (hydrophilic polymer-coated vesicles bound to antibodies and  $\leq 0.15 \mu\text{m}$  in size) can now be designed which may be able to recognize and bind with greater specificity to target cells following systemic administration (reviewed by Lasic and Papahadjopoulos, 1995; Gregoriadis, 1995). It has been shown that long-circulating immunoliposomes (LCI) enhanced therapeutic efficacy of encapsulated doxorubicin in a murine lung tumor model (Ahmad et al., 1993).

The effect of size on biodistribution of LCI has been studied in a rabbit model of myocardial infarction (Torchilin et al., 1996). Small sized (0.12–0.15  $\mu\text{m}$ ) LCI containing infarct-specific antimyosin antibodies (AM) exhibited significantly lower accumulation in RES compared to CL with or without AM. However, the accumulation of LCI-AM was higher in kidneys and lungs compared to CL-AM. The accumulation of large sized (0.35–0.4  $\mu\text{m}$ ) LCI in spleen was 2-fold higher than small sized LCI (Torchilin et al., 1996).

Active targeting using immunoliposomes has several advantages over that of antibody-drug conjugates (Gregoriadis, 1995): (i) immunoliposomes can carry a significantly larger number of drug molecules compared to simple conjugates; (ii) immunoliposomes can encapsulate drugs with widely varying physicochemical properties; and

(iii) drugs can also reach their intracellular target by diffusion after release from immunoliposomes associated with target tissue (Fig. 2). Therefore, unlike antibodies-drug conjugates, in some cases immunoliposomes may not have to undergo receptor mediated-endocytosis to deliver their contents intracellularly. The limitations of active targeting of drugs using liposomes are discussed in the Section Section 5.4.

#### 4.7. *Intraperitoneal administration*

Direct administration of antineoplastic agents into the intraperitoneal (i.p.) cavity has been proposed to be therapeutically advantageous for cancers that develop in or metastasize to the peritoneal cavity (Dedrick et al., 1978). Intraperitoneal chemotherapy has been somewhat unsuccessful for free drugs because of relatively fast clearance of the drugs from the i.p. cavity resulting in lowered concentrations at the site of action (Markman et al., 1989). However, the clearance of liposomes from the peritoneal cavity is significantly slower than that of free drug and therefore, higher drug concentrations can be achieved in the proximity of the target site for extended periods of time with the use of liposome formulations. Furthermore, reformulation of erosive drugs in liposomes has been shown to reduce local drug toxicity such as dermal toxicity of doxorubicin (Forssen and Tokes, 1983). An increase in TI of paclitaxel in liposomes after i.p. administration (Sharma et al., 1996) may also be due to a reduction in local (abdominal) toxicity of the drug.

#### 4.8. *Immunological adjuvants in vaccines*

Liposomes can encapsulate antigens in their aqueous space or incorporate in the bilayer depending on the lipophilicity of the antigen. Liposomes were first used as immunological adjuvants in order to enhance the immune response to encapsulated diphtheria toxoid (Allison and Gregoriadis, 1974). Since then, liposomes have been used as nontoxic adjuvants with bacterial, viral, protozoan, tumor and other antigens (Alving, 1991; Gregoriadis, 1995; Kersten and

Crommelin, 1995). The tendency of liposomes to interact with macrophages in RES is exploited in this approach (passive targeting).

The mechanism by which liposomes cause increases in antigens' immune response is not fully understood. However, augmentation of liposomal adjuvanticity can be achieved by co-administration of liposome encapsulated antigen with other adjuvants such as lipid A, lipopolysaccharides, muramyl dipeptide and interleukin (IL-2) (Gregoriadis, 1990; Gregoriadis and Panagiotidi, 1989). Furthermore, antibody-mediated targeting of liposomal to antigen-presenting cells may also improve immunostimulatory effects (Alving, 1991). The influence of physicochemical properties of the liposomes such as charge density, membrane fluidity and epitope density, on the immune response of the antigen has been extensively studied (reviewed by Kersten and Crommelin, 1995). For instance, liposome formulations of inactivated encephalomyocarditis and Semliki Forest viruses were significantly more immunogenic when charged phospholipids were used compared to neutral lipids (Kraaijeveld et al., 1984). The phase transition temperature ( $T_c$ ) of the lipids also appears to influence immunogenicity. For example, immunogenicity of haptens was higher in liposomes composed of lipids with a high  $T_c$  than in those with a low  $T_c$  (Yasuda et al., 1977).

Recently, the first liposome-based vaccine (liposomes containing inactivated hepatitis A virions) was approved for human use in Switzerland and currently, several other liposome-based vaccines are in clinical trials (Gregoriadis, 1995).

### 5. **Limitations of liposome technology**

As described above, liposomes have a great potential in the area of drug delivery. However, liposome-based drug formulations have not entered the market in great numbers so far. Some of the problems limiting the manufacture and development of liposomes have been stability issues, batch to batch reproducibility, sterilization method, low drug entrapment, particle size control, production of large batch sizes and short

circulation half-life of vesicles. Some of these issues such as short half-life have been resolved resulting in increased numbers of clinical trials (Table 3) and new approvals (Table 4). Some of the remaining problems are discussed in detail below.

### 5.1. Stability

One of the major problems limiting the widespread use of liposomes is stability—both physical and chemical. Depending on their composition, the final liposome formulations may have short shelf-lives partly due to chemical and physical instability. Chemical instability may be caused by hydrolysis of ester bond and/or oxidation of unsaturated acyl chains of lipids. Physical instability may be caused by drug leakage from the vesicles and/or aggregation or fusion of vesicles to form larger particles. Both of these processes (drug leakage and change in liposome size) influence the *in vivo* performance of the drug formulation, and therefore may affect the therapeutic index of the drug. For instance, large liposomes may be rapidly cleared by RES leading to sub-therapeutic plasma concentrations of the drug and reduced AUCs (area under the plasma concentration–time curve). Physical instability may also occur due to partitioning out of a hydrophobic drug from the bilayer into the solvent on standing (or long term storage). Some of the stability problems may be overcome by lyophilization in which the final liposome product is freeze-dried with a cryoprotectant (mostly a sugar like Trehalose) and is reconstituted with vehicle immediately prior to administration. Lyophilization increases the shelf-life of the finished product by preserving it in a relatively more stable dry state. Some liposome products on market or in clinical trials are provided as a lyophilized powder. For example, AmBisome™, the first liposome product to be marketed in several countries is supplied as a lyophilized powder to be reconstituted with sterile water for injection. Recently, lyophilized paclitaxel–liposome formulations have been developed which show good stability (Sharma et al., 1997; Straubinger et al., 1995).

### 5.2. Sterilization

Identification of a suitable method for sterilization of liposome formulations is a major challenge because phospholipids are thermolabile and sensitive to sterilization procedures involving the use of heat, radiation and/or chemical sterilizing agents. The method available for sterilization of liposome formulations after manufacture is filtration through sterile 0.22  $\mu\text{m}$  membranes. However, filtration is not suitable for large vesicles ( $>0.2 \mu\text{m}$ ) and also is not able to remove viruses. Sterilization by other approaches such as  $\gamma$ -irradiation and exposure to chemical sterilizing agents are not recommended because they can cause degradation of liposome components and may leave toxic contaminants (Zuidam et al., 1995). Suitable methods for sterilization of liposome formulations are being explored by several groups. For instance, it has been shown that under certain conditions, liposomes with thermostable, lipophilic drugs could be sterilized by autoclaving without substantial loss of contents and/or degradation of phospholipids (Zuidam et al., 1993).

### 5.3. Encapsulation efficiency

Liposome formulation of a drug could only be developed if the encapsulation efficiency is such that therapeutic doses could be delivered in a reasonable amount of lipid, since lipids in high doses may be toxic and also cause non-linear (saturable) pharmacokinetics of liposomal drug formulation. Some new approaches that provide high encapsulation efficiencies for hydrophilic drugs have been developed. For instance, active loading of the amphipathic weak acidic or basic drugs in empty liposomes can be used to increase the encapsulation efficiency (Mayer et al., 1986; Clerc and Barenholz, 1995). However, active loading is not suitable for hydrophobic drugs such as paclitaxel for which encapsulation efficiency is  $\leq 3$  mole% mainly due to the low affinity of drug for the lipid bilayers (Sharma et al., 1997; Sharma and Straubinger, 1994).

#### 5.4. Active targeting

One of the major limitations of active targeting using ligand-directed immunoliposomes has been their rapid clearance due to non-specific uptake by the cells of RES. The development of LCL conjugated with ligands has revived interest in this field since LCL are not as rapidly cleared by RES. However, many problems still remain to be overcome. For instance, foreign immunoglobulin–ligands conjugated to immunoliposomes may induce immunogenicity and increase clearance on subsequent exposure. The ligand (antibodies) conjugated with liposomes may increase the liposome size and reduce extravasation and thus could limit targeting to intravascular targets (Gregoriadis, 1995). It has been shown that size of LCI may be increased in the blood circulation by interaction of the antibodies with serum components, which in turn can increase their size-dependent uptake by spleen (Emanuel et al., 1996). Moreover, immunoliposome enter the cells by endocytosis (Fig. 2) and if liposome contents are not released from the endosome, they would ultimately be degraded in the lysosomes (Section 5.6). This would only be true for drugs sensitive to lysosomal enzymes.

#### 5.5. Gene therapy

A number of technical problems have to be overcome before cationic liposome-mediated transfection can be fully exploited. For instance, liposomes are significantly less efficient than viral-vectors in their transfection ability. Furthermore, the DNA–lipid complexes are not stable in terms of particle size (Gao and Huang, 1995; Hong et al., 1997) for long periods of time. In addition, there is lack of *in vivo* targeting after systemic administration, and the toxicity of cationic lipids limits the administered dose of the DNA–lipid complex. Plasmid–liposomes complexes may be more suited to delivery of genetic material by local administration.

#### 5.6. Lysosomal degradation

Once the liposome has reached the target cell, the efficacy is determined not only by the amount

of drug associated with the cell, but also by the amount of drug reaching the ‘target molecule’ inside the cells. Immunoliposomes may deliver the drug to the cells selectively but the pharmacological activity depends on the ability of intact drug to diffuse into cytoplasm from the endosomes in sufficient amounts.

### 6. Liposome formulations in market

Liposome and lipid–complex formulations of doxorubicin, daunorubicin and amphotericin B (AmB) have been approved for clinical use in several countries (Table 4). Anthracycline glycosides such as doxorubicin and daunorubicin are highly effective antineoplastic drugs, however, they can cause severe cardiac toxicity in humans. For free doxorubicin, the potential for development of irreversible cardiomyopathy is the major dose-limiting factor which restricts the life-time cumulative drug dose in humans to 550 mg/m<sup>2</sup>. Long-circulating liposome formulations of anthracyclines have been shown to improve the TI of the drugs against a variety of solid tumors by not only reducing cardiac toxicity but also increasing drug accumulation in tumors (Gabizon, 1994; Forssen et al., 1996). Doxorubicin is an ideal candidate for encapsulation in liposomes since it can be encapsulated with high efficiency into liposomes using an active loading method (Mayer et al., 1990). The first liposome product approved for use in USA was Doxil™, a LCL formulation of doxorubicin. Doxil™ exhibited up to 8-fold increased circulation half-life compared to free drug (Gabizon, 1994) and a lower incidence of side-effects presumably by avoiding high peak concentrations of the free drug. Encapsulation of doxorubicin in liposomes has increased the TI and made possible dose escalation mainly by reducing the dose-limiting cardiac toxicity.

Amphotericin B (AmB) is an antifungal agent used for the treatment of serious systemic fungal infections. However, AmB therapy is associated with high rates of serious side effects which include nephrotoxicity, thrombophlebitis, hypokalemia and anemia (de Marie et al., 1994). These side effects limit the dose levels which can

be achieved (0.7–1.5 mg/kg of Fungizone™) and are the major reason for failure or discontinuation of therapy. Liposome- and lipid-based formulation of AmB have been shown to have superior TI over the deoxycholate-based formulation (Fungizone™) mainly due to a decrease in the dose limiting nephrotoxicity. The incidence of other side-effects is also lower; in some studies these (primarily hypokalemia) ranged from 10 to 20% (Hay, 1994; Ng and Denning, 1995). The reduction in toxicity may be due to selective transfer of AmB from lipid bilayers or complexes to the fungus (target site), thus decreasing the interaction of drug with human cell membranes (Juliano et al., 1987). The reduction in the extent and frequency of side effects such as nephrotoxicity has allowed for escalation of AmB doses.

In summary, this article reviewed the possible applications of liposomes and discussed, in brief, some problems associated with formulation and development. An encouraging sign is the increasing number of clinical trials involving liposome and lipid-based products (Table 3). With the newer developments in the field, several companies are actively engaged in expansion and evaluation of liposome products for use in anticancer and antifungal therapy and for prophylaxis (vaccines) against diseases. Further refinements in the liposome technology will spur the full-fledged evolution of liposomes as drug carriers.

## 7. Abbreviations

AmB	amphotericin B
CL	conventional liposomes
CHEMS	cholesteryl hemisuccinate
Chol	cholesterol
DC-chol	3BN <sup>-</sup> (N',N'-dimethylaminoethane)carbamoyl-cholesterol
DDAB	dimethyl-dioctadecyl ammonium bromide
DOGS	dioctadecyldimethyl ammonium chloride
DMRIE	1,2-dimyristyloxypropyl-3-dimethyl-hydroxyethyl ammonium bromide

DORIE	1,2-dioleoyloxypropyl-3-dimethyl-hydroxyethyl ammonium bromide
DOPE	dioleoylphosphatidyl ethanolamine
DOSPA	2,3-dioleoyloxy-N-(2(spermine carboxamido)-ethyl)-N,N-dimethyl-1-propanaminium fluoroacetate
DOTAP	1,2-dioleoyloxy-3-(trimethylammonio) propane
DOTMA	N-{1-(2,3-dioleoyloxy)propyl}-N,N,N-trimethyl ammonium chloride
FL	fusogenic liposomes
GM1	monosialoganglioside
HPI	hydrogenated phosphatidyl-inositol
LCI	long-circulating immunoliposomes
LCL	long-circulating liposomes
LUV	large unilamellar vesicles
MLV	multilamellar vesicles
OA	oleic acid
PC	phosphatidylcholine
PE	phosphatidylethanolamine
PG	phosphatidylglycerol
RES	reticuloendothelial system
PEG-DSPE	polyethylene glycol conjugated with distearoyl PE
SUV	small unilamellar vesicles
TI	therapeutic index

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