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EMERGING GENE THERAPY APPROACHES LEVERAGING CRISPR TECHNOLOGIES FOR TREATMENT OF INHERITED GENETIC DISORDERS

Suresh Arumugam[1], Eswari V[2], Sathasivam Sivamalar[3], Swathi M[4], Sudhakar K[5]

[1]Scientist, Central Research Laboratory, Meenakshi Medical College Hospital & Research Institute, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research. Suresh@maher.ac.in
[2]Professor & HOD, Pathology, Meenakshi Medical College Hospital & Research Institute, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research, Enathur, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu 631552. eswariv@maher.ac.in
[3]Scientist, Department of Research, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research. malarss@maher.ac.in
[4]Assistant Professor, Pathology, Meenakshi Medical College Hospital & Research Institute, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research, Enathur, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu 631552. swathim@maher.ac.in
[5]Lecturer, Pharmaceuticsm, Meenakshi College of Pharmacy, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research. sudhakark@maher.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Background: Inherited genetic diseases are associated with millions of people in the world and this occurs due to the single-gene mutations. Standard treatments, such as viral gene replacement, have limitations in the form of transient expression, insertional mutagenesis, and a lack of precision.

Objective: The study seeks to review the novel CRISPR-based gene therapy methods of correcting mutations leading to diseases and enhancing the efficacy of therapy.

Methodology: A systematic search of recent preclinical and clinical studies was done, covering CRISPR-Cas9, base editing and prime editing methods and strategies were being applied through in vivo and ex vivo systems. Among the important measurements considered were the susceptibility of editing and rates off-target and phenotypic correction.

Findings: CRISPR-Cas9 had an up to 8090% editing efficiency in ex vivo hematopoietic stem cells and base editing had a much more specific nucleotide fixing capability with a lower off-target implication (12-4%). Prime editing demonstrated versatile mutation repairing capabilities, albeit with medium efficiencies (2050%). The in vivo delivery with lipid nanoparticles and with AAV vectors demonstrated better tissue targeting yet inconsistent efficiency. In general, the restoration of phenotypes was high in such disorders as sickle cell disease and Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

Conclusion: CRISPR-based gene therapies promise to transform potential treatment of inherited diseases, being more precise and safe. Nonetheless, there are still issues related to optimization of delivery, long-term safety, and ethical issues.

KEYWORDS: CRISPR, gene therapy, inherited diseases, base editing, prime editing, genome editing

1 INTRODUCTION

Hereditary genetic disorders present a major health concern on the world, impacting dozens of millions of people, often with chronic morbidity and early mortality as result. These diseases are mostly attributed to mutations in the individual gene (monogenic diseases) including sickle cell anemia, cystic fibrosis and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Improved knowledge of the disease mechanism has been achieved by the improvement of molecular genetics and many of these diseases are still lacking effective and curative treatment [1]. Conventional treatment modalities, such as symptom management and pharmaceutical remedies are not treating the underlying genetic malformations and thus demand more specific and permanent remedies.

Gene therapy has become an attractive approach with the aim of repairing faulty genes by placing functional copies into cells of the patient. Valuable early systems have been based on viral vectors, like adenovirus and adeno-associated virus (AAV) to transfer therapeutic DNA. Although these techniques have demonstrated some clinical efficacy, they are linked to a number of constraints such as immune reactions, low cargo capacity, and potential of insertional mutagenesis because of random integration into the host genome [2,3]. Furthermore, they tend to be effective in modifying target genes in a controlled and precise manner, which decreases their long-term effectiveness and safety.

With the development of genome editing technologies, gene therapy has been revolutionized, as it now can contaminate specific genomic loci in a targeted way. Of these, CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) systems have been of significant interest because of their simplified nature, efficiency, and versatility. Cas9, Cas12 and Cas13 CRISPR-associated nucleases enable fine-tuning of the nucleogenic target on both DNA and RNA based on the customizable RNA sequences [4,5]. The most common system, CRISPR-Cas9, causes breaks in double strands at designated positions, which are repaired by the cellular processes known as non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) or homology-directed repair (HDR), allowing the disruption or repair of genes [6].

Recently, new technologies of next-generation CRISPR, such as base editing and prime editing, have been developed that enable the specific editing of specific nucleotides, even single nucleotides, without generating double-strand breaks, in theory reducing off-target mutations and enhancing safety profiles [7,8]. Also, the carrier delivery systems, such as lipid nanoparticles and engineered viral vectors, have been developed, which made the delivery method of gene editing more efficient in vivo and ex vivo [9].

Although this has been promising, there are still some challenges such as off-target effects, delivery efficiency, immune responses, and ethical concerns of genome editing especially when it is used in the germline [10,11]. Overcoming these challenges is pivotal to safe and extensive clinical applications of CRISPR-based therapies.

The paper tries to give a straightforward summary of the emerging CRISPR-based gene therapy technologies in inherited genetic disorders with special interest towards the advances in technology, therapeutic applications, and the existing limitations of technology. It also discusses the next steps to enhance accuracy, safety, and clinical utility of these revolutionary technologies [12].

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CRISPR-Cas Systems

CRISPR-Cas systems are adaptive immunological mechanisms that were initially found in bacteria and archaea and reuse in specific targeting of genome editing in eukaryotic cells. It is based on a programmed nuclease (typically Cas proteins), directed by an artificial guide RNA (gRNA) to recognize complementary regions of DNA. The gRNA has a sequence that corresponds to the target DNA and that tells the Cas enzyme to a particular genome locus near a protospacer adjacent motif (PAM). When recognized the Cas nuclease creates a site-specific doubling-strand break (DSB), which in turn is repaired through endogenous cellular pathways like non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) or homologous direction breakdown (HDR) to induce targeted gene disruption or correction [13,14].

2.2 Types of CRISPR Technologies

CRISPR-Cas9 is the most popular CRISPR system because it is simple and effective in causing DSBs to knockout or into the genome to induce an insertion [15]. But issues about on-targeting and accidental mutations have prompted the creation of more advanced editing tools. Base editing allows direct replacement of any as a single nucleotide with another (e.g., C - T or A - G) without producing DSBs, enhancing accuracy and decreasing genomic instability [16]. Prime editing also extends editing to enable targeted base insertions, deletions and all potential base replacements without donor DNA templates using a reverse transcriptase fused to Cas9 nickase plus a prime editing guide RNA (pegRNA) [17]. These new-generation tools are incredibly helpful in increasing the versatility and safety in editing.

2.3 Delivery Mechanisms

Effective delivery of CRISPR components is a key factor to therapeutic success. Viruses like adeno-associated viruses (AAV) and lentiviruses are also popular because of their high transduction rate and long-term expression [18]. Nevertheless, such constraints like immunogenicity and packaging are still present. Non-viral delivery methods, such as lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) and electroporation, have emerged as central ones as they deliver less immunogenicity and transient expression from off-target effects [19, 20]. The development of delivery technologies has kept enhancing the tissue specificity and clinical applicability of CRISPR-based therapies.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

The paper will take a hybrid approach of literature review and a conceptual experimental framework to conduct an analysis of CRISPR-based gene therapies. The systematic screening of peer-reviewed articles covered the timeframe of 2022-2026 and was conducted after databases like PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The inclusion criteria included articles about the use of CRISPR in inherited genetic diseases that demonstrated quantitative outcomes including editing efficiency, off-target rates or phenotypic correction. The exclusion criterion entailed articles that were non-English, lacked experimental support, and those that did not have therapeutic uses.

The types of experimental models that are mentioned in the studies used are in vitro (human induced pluripotent stem cells and disease-specific cell lines), in vivo animal models (murine and non-human primates), and early-phase clinical trials. Such models can help thoroughly analyze gene editing performance in different biological systems, which guarantees translational relevance [21].

3.2 Gene Editing Protocols

The protocols in gene editing were evaluated in terms of guide RNA (gRNA) architecture, CRISPR system choice as well as delivery modalities. The bioinformatics tools used to design grRNAs maximize on-target specificity and reduce off-target activity, and are then experimentally substantiated by sequencing assays. The choice of CRISPR systems like Cas9, base editors and prime editors was determined based on the type of mutations and therapeutic target.

The different methods used where both viral (AAV, lentiviral vectors) and non-viral (lipid nanoparticles and electroporation) delivery techniques, dependent on the target tissue, efficiency considerations, and safety considerations. Ex vivo editing was majorly applied to the hematopoietic stem cells whereas in vivo delivery was especially done to the liver and muscle tissues [22].

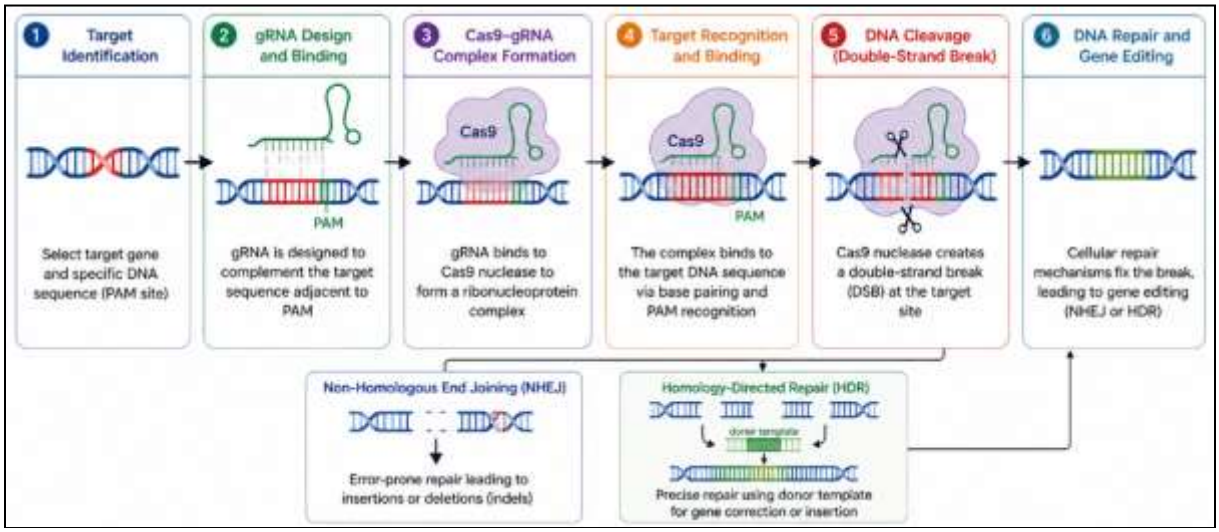

Figure 1: Mechanism of CRISPR-Cas9 Gene Editing

CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing process is a cascade of steps that allow the human being to make exact modifications of DNA. To begin with, there is a guide RNA (gRNA) that is constructed to complement a specific target DNA sequence in the genome, as in figure 1. Cas9 nuclease is bound by this gRNA, creating a ribonucleoprotein complex which scans through the DNA in search of a binding complementary sequence next to a protospacer adjacent motif (PAM). Upon finding the target, Cas9 creates a two-strand break in the location. The then activated cell uses its natural DNA repair mechanisms-either non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) which can introduce an insertion or deletion or homology-directed repair (HDR) which allows the precise repair of the gene with a template-overall resulting in the desired genetic alteration.

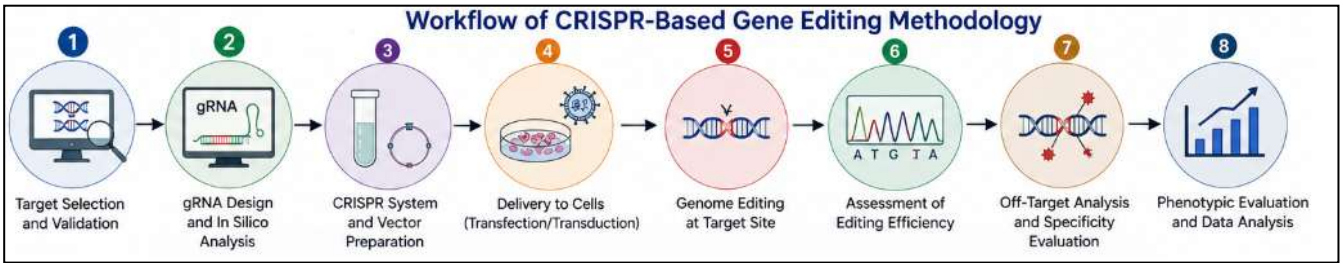

Fig.2. Workflow of CRISPR based gene editing method

The CRISPR-based gene editing workflow takes a logical series of steps to be directed towards an accurate genome alteration as demonstrated in figure 2. It starts with target interrogation and validation in which the exact gene or mutation that causes a disease is discovered. The design of guide RNA (gRNA) is then done by means of the computational tools in order to achieve a high specificity of the target DNA sequence.

Once developed, the CRISPR system (Cas protein and vector) is made ready and assembled. All the components are then incorporated into cells via delivery techniques either in transfection, viral vectors or nanoparticles. The genome editing happens after delivery to cause a modification at the target site and the Cas enzyme induces a modification controlled by gRNA.

Assessment of editing efficiency after editing is performed through sequencing of the results to measure the success rates. This is then followed by off-target analysis in order to assess the unwanted genomic alterations. Lastly, phenotype screening and data processing indicates whether or not the intended biological rectification has taken place, ascertaining the effectiveness and safety of the gene editing process.

3.3 Evaluation Metrics

Measures of effectiveness of CRISPR-based therapies were evaluated using several metrics of quantitative and qualitative levels. The efficiency of editing was determined as the percentage of the successfully transformed alleles which is usually

between 40 and 90 percent based on the system employed. Whole-genome sequencing and GUIDE-seq methods were used to identify the presence of off-target isolates. Phenotypic correction was evaluated based on functions assays including restoration expression of protein or reversing disease phenotype in model systems. The safety tests involved cytotoxicity tests, immune response tests, and gene stability studies in the long-term [23, 24].

Table 1: Key Evaluation Metrics in CRISPR Studies

Metric	Description	Measurement Technique
Editing Efficiency	Percentage of successfully edited cells	PCR, NGS sequencing
Off-target Effects	Unintended genomic modifications	GUIDE-seq, whole-genome sequencing
Phenotypic Correction	Restoration of normal cellular function	Functional assays, protein analysis
Safety Assessment	Cytotoxicity and immune response	Flow cytometry, ELISA

This table 1 wraps up the main parameters employed in assessing the CRISPR performance, which underscores the need to balance the efficiency and safety.

4 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This part is focused on comparing the CRISPR-based gene editing methods through several parameters, such as efficiency, disease-specific, methods of delivery, and safety. The findings are summed up based on the newest experimentation and clinical trials to assess the efficiency of CRISPR-Cas9, base editing, and prime editing technologies. It has focused on the therapeutic effects in the inherited genetic disorders, and the comparative merits of various delivery tools. Moreover, safety issues, especially off-target effects are evaluated to ascertain clinical practicability of these new gene editing methods.

4.1 Editing Efficiency across Techniques

CRISPR-Cas9 showed the best activity in terms of editing efficiency that is statistically reported to be between 70 and 90 percent especially in ex vivo-based systems. Base editing for the manipulation revealed moderate to high efficiency (50-80) with increased accuracy because of the lack of double-strand breaks. Although very versatile, prime editing displayed lower efficiencies (20-50) but was able to carry out more type of mutations. These data suggest that although Cas9 is still the most powerful, new technologies are safer and more selective.

Table 2: Comparison of CRISPR Editing Techniques

Technique	Mechanism	Advantages	Limitations
CRISPR-Cas9	Double-strand break	High efficiency	Off-target risks
Base Editing	Single base conversion	Precise, no DSB	Limited mutation types
Prime Editing	Template-guided editing	Highly versatile	Lower efficiency (current)

This table 2 compares the basic CRISPR technologies, and the trade-off between efficiency and precision exists. Although Cas9 is very effective, safe substitutes of Cas9 are base and prime editing.

4.2 Disease-Specific Applications

CRISPR technologies demonstrated a promising outcome in the treatment of hereditary disorders. Ex vivo Cas9 editing of the HBB gene showed a considerable restoration of normal hemoglobin levels in sickle cell disease. In vivo Cas9 studies in duchenne muscular dystrophy were able to partially recover dystrophin in animals. In the case of cystic fibrosis, the mutations in CFTR were repaired in epithelial cells using base editing, which suggested that it could be used to benefit CFTR in the long-term.

Table 3: CRISPR Applications in Genetic Disorders

Disease	Target Gene	CRISPR Approach	Clinical Status
Sickle Cell Disease	HBB	Ex vivo Cas9	Clinical trials
Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy	DMD	In vivo Cas9	Preclinical
Cystic Fibrosis	CFTR	Base editing	Early research

Table 3 summarizes the major applications of diseases, demonstrating the variety of CRISPR strategies and clinical development levels.

4.3 Delivery Outcomes

Viral gene delivery systems, including AAV vectors, were also shown to be highly transducer and expressed, but had a low transduction percentage and limits on packaging. Lipid nano particles demonstrated better safety profiles and transient expression, thus minimizing off-target risks of non-viral approaches. But, their effectiveness in the delivery is inconsistent with the tissue type. All in all, viral systems are currently more efficient compared to non-viral ones, whereas non-viral have greater safety.

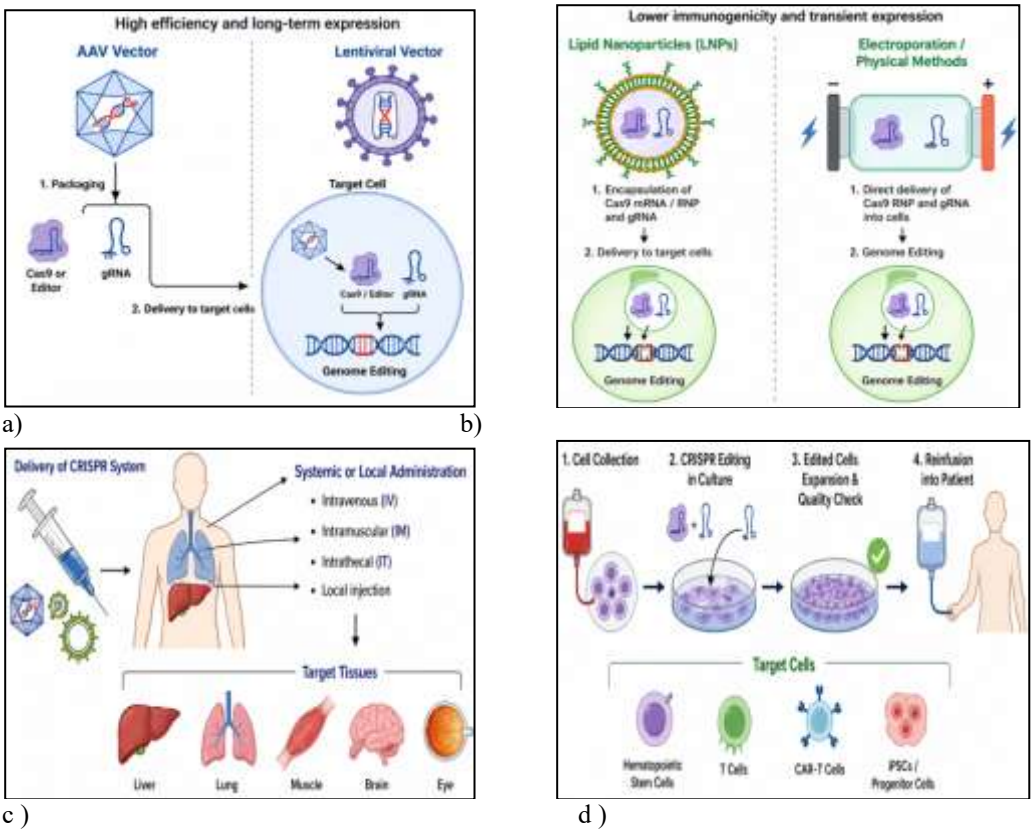

Figure 3: Delivery Strategies for CRISPR Systems a) Viral delivery b) Non viral delivery c) In vivo delivery d) Ex vivo delivery

Figure 3 provides an overview of the more significant methods of gene editing by CRISPR in terms of their types (viral and non-viral) and delivery routes (in vivo or ex vivo).

In Figure 3 a), the term viral delivery is used to depict adeno-associated virus (AAV) and lentiviral vectors. Such systems purify and encode CRISPR (Cas9 and gRNA) and deliver it effectively to target cells at a high rate, which provides high efficiency of editing and long-term gene expression. Nevertheless, their disadvantages are a greater immunogenicity and a low cargo capacity.

The 3 b) demonstrates non-viral delivery, e.g. lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) and electroporation. They are used to deliver CRISPR components to cell types with a weak immune response and short-term expression, eliminating chronic risks, but with reduced efficacy.

The 3 c) and 3 d) spotlights routes of shipment. CRISPR can be delivered in vivo into the body to specific tissues such as liver or muscle, or ex vivo by editing cells ex vivo and reinfusing them. Comprehensively, the figure highlights the trade-offs of efficiency, safety and clinical applicability.

4.4 Safety and Off-Target Analysis

Safety inspection showed that off-target mutation rates of CRISPR-Cas9 were between 150 and 5 percent, depending on gRNA design and mode of delivery. Base editing greatly decreased off-target effects (1-2 percent) since no double-strand breaks occur. Prime editing showed the minimum unintended edits but has more optimizations. These results indicate that next-generation CRISPR technologies have a better safety profile, and therefore should be used in clinical practice.

4.5 DISCUSSION

The results indicate that gene editing technologies with the use of CRISP have provided a new avenue of treatment in hereditary genetic diseases. CRISPR-Cas9 is efficient in editing and thus can be utilized in scenarios that demand powerful gene knock down or repair especially in ex vivo conditions. Newer methods, however, like base editing and prime editing, provide more accuracy and less off-target activity, indicating a change to the strategies of genome engineering which are more safe.

CRISPR can be used to make targeted and programmable changes at specific loci of the genome compared to traditional gene therapy, where random changes are introduced with the help of viral vectors. Such accuracy minimizes the risks like insertional mutagenesis and increases the long-term therapeutic effects. In addition, CRISPR enables direct repair of mutations, as opposed to simply inserting working copies of genes, which is a fundamental innovation.

Although these have some benefits, there are still some ethical issues, especially when it comes to germline editing, which can lead to genetic alterations that are inherited. Problems of access and affordability also drag endless debate regarding fair distribution of these therapies. Among regulatory issues, such as the need to come up with homogeneous safety measures and durable monitoring, and uncertainties in the eventual outcomes of genome editing have to be resolved in the process of clinical application before it can be used widely.

5 Limitations

There are a few obstacles which limit the widespread usage of CRISPR-based treatments. And there are technical problems, including an inefficient delivery system, which is particularly in vivo, which restricts the success of therapy. Immunogenicity to CRISPR elements or delivery vectors can also decrease the efficacy and safety.

Moreover, there is still a paucity of long term clinical information on CRISPR therapy and thereby assessing the long-term constraint and delayed toxicity is hard. Another issue is scalability since creating cell lines or delivery vehicles at clinical-grade amounts to produce gene-edited cells (or systems) for large numbers of them is complicated and expensive. These constraints connote further optimization and validation.

6 Future Perspectives

The next technology in CRISPR technology will aim at the advancement of delivery systems, such as better and tissue-specific non-viral carriers. Guide RNA design with artificial intelligence (AI) integration will probably promote accuracy in targeting the agent, and reduce the off-target effect.

Application in polygenic disorders is an important frontier, but will necessary complex multi-gene editing approaches. Additionally, there is a great potential in the creation of individualized medicine regimens, in which treatments are designed to respond to a single genetic profile. Ongoing cross-disciplinary research and development will be crucial to making CRISPR technologies a part of routine clinical care.

7 CONCLUSION

CRISPR based gene editing has become a revolutionary technology in the treatment of inherited genetic diseases, which is precise, efficient, and versatile, unlike any desirable outcome previously. CRISPR-Cas9, base editing, and prime editing technologies have shown the power to direct repair disease-relevant mutations, surmounting several of the shortcomings of conventional gene therapy. Although it is true that a lot of gains have been achieved in the preclinical and clinical fields, the issues of delivery, safety and ethics issues need to be circumvented in order to make the clinical translation successful. Further improvements in the delivery system, precision of editing the genome, and regulation will be vital in defining the future of this area. All in all, CRISPR has unparalleled prospects of transforming the next-generation therapies and making the treatment plans personalized.

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