The Role of Proteomics in Cancer Biomarker Discovery

Peter Gilbar*

Department of Clinical and Biomedical Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

***Corresponding author:** Peter Gilbar, Department of Clinical and Biomedical Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; E-mail: peter.gil@health.qld.gov.au

Introduction

Proteomics, the large-scale study of proteins, has emerged as a transformative approach in understanding and combating cancer. As proteins are central to cellular functions and signaling pathways, their analysis provides a wealth of information on cellular states and disease progression, making proteomics particularly valuable in discovering biomarkers for cancer. Cancer biomarkers are essential for early detection, personalized treatment, and monitoring disease progression, and proteomics offers a comprehensive view of the changes in protein expression, structure, and interaction that characterize different cancer types. This article explores how proteomics contributes to cancer biomarker discovery, the methods used, challenges faced, and future potential in precision oncology.

Description

Understanding proteomics and cancer biomarkers

Proteomics aims to identify, quantify, and characterize the entire protein complement of a cell, tissue, or organism. In the context of cancer, where genetic mutations and cellular changes drive disease progression, proteins often serve as more immediate and functional indicators of these changes than genetic data alone. Cancer biomarkers, which may be proteins or protein modifications specific to a cancer type, provide a window into disease progression and response to treatment.

Cancer biomarkers are generally categorized into three types:

- **Diagnostic biomarkers:** Indicators for identifying cancer at its onset.
- **Prognostic biomarkers:** Inform on the likely course or outcome of the disease.
- **Predictive biomarkers:** Suggest how well a patient might respond to a specific treatment.

Studying the proteome helps in identifying proteins or protein modifications that act as reliable biomarkers for these purposes, making it possible to detect cancers earlier, customize treatments, and monitor patient outcomes.

The importance of proteomics in cancer biomarker discovery

While genomics has played a foundational role in understanding cancer, its limitations—such as the inability to capture real-time functional changes underscore the value of proteomics. Unlike DNA, which is relatively stable, proteins are dynamic and change rapidly in response to cellular conditions, including cancerous mutations. This dynamic nature enables proteomics to capture disease-relevant information that genomics might miss, such as Post-Translational Modifications (PTMs) that affect protein function. By characterizing these protein-level changes, proteomics can reveal biomarkers that better represent the functional state of a tumor or its microenvironment, aiding in the discovery of effective diagnostic and therapeutic targets.

Key techniques in proteomics for biomarker discovery

Proteomic research employs a variety of powerful tools to analyze proteins on a large scale, each with unique strengths and applications in biomarker discovery:

Mass Spectrometry (MS) Mass spectrometry is a cornerstone of proteomics, allowing researchers to identify and quantify proteins by measuring the mass-to-charge ratio of ionized protein fragments. MS-based proteomics can capture large sets of proteins in tissue samples, identifying alterations in cancerous cells that may serve as biomarkers. MS-based proteomics is sensitive enough to detect both highly abundant and low-abundance proteins, making it invaluable for identifying proteins associated with cancer.

Two-Dimensional Gel Electrophoresis (2D-GE) 2D-GE separates proteins by isoelectric point and molecular weight, creating a map of protein expression. This technique is useful for comparing protein expression between normal and cancerous cells, helping identify potential biomarkers that vary in concentration across conditions.

Protein microarrays protein microarrays use antibodies to target specific proteins, allowing high-throughput detection and quantification. This technique is advantageous for studying the immune response in cancer patients and identifying protein biomarkers that may serve as indicators of tumor growth or immune escape mechanisms.

Immunoassays and western blotting immunoassays, including ELISA (Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay), and Western blotting validate potential biomarkers by quantifying specific

proteins in tissue or blood samples. These methods are commonly used to confirm findings from other proteomic studies, ensuring that candidate biomarkers are accurate and reliable.

Single cell proteomics single-cell proteomics, a newer approach, enables analysis of protein expression at the individual cell level, providing insights into the heterogeneity within tumors. Given that cancer is highly heterogeneous, studying proteins at the single-cell level helps identify unique biomarkers within cancer subpopulations, leading to more precise diagnostics and treatments.

Proteomics in action: Examples of cancer biomarker discovery

Proteomics has been instrumental in identifying cancer biomarkers, with some discoveries already translated into clinical applications. Below are examples of how proteomics has contributed to advancing cancer biomarker research:

Breast cancer: Proteomics has helped identify HER2 (Human Epidermal growth factor Receptor 2) as a biomarker for breast cancer. HER2-positive breast cancer patients can be treated with HER2-targeted therapies like trastuzumab, improving outcomes by personalizing treatment. Proteomic research has also contributed to the discovery of markers like CA15-3 and others used in clinical monitoring.

Prostate cancer: Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) is one of the most well-known cancer biomarkers, widely used in prostate cancer screening. Proteomics has helped refine PSA testing by identifying proteins that complement PSA levels, enhancing diagnostic accuracy and distinguishing between benign and malignant conditions.

Ovarian cancer: Proteomics research has identified biomarkers like CA-125 and HE4 for ovarian cancer. These markers have improved the detection of ovarian cancer, especially when used in combination, allowing for better screening and monitoring of at-risk patients.

Lung cancer: Proteomics has contributed to the discovery of biomarkers such as CEA (Carcinoembryonic Antigen) and CYFRA 21-1 in lung cancer. These biomarkers are used to assess disease progression and monitor response to treatment, helping clinicians track disease status over time.

Colorectal cancer: Proteomic studies have identified biomarkers such as CEA and CA19-9 for colorectal cancer. Ongoing research aims to improve non-invasive screening methods through blood-based biomarkers, which may eventually reduce reliance on invasive colonoscopies.

Conclusion

Proteomics has proven indispensable in cancer biomarker discovery, providing insights into the molecular mechanisms driving cancer and enabling more precise approaches to diagnosis and treatment. While challenges remain, advances in technology and interdisciplinary collaboration continue to improve the efficiency and accuracy of proteomic research. As proteomics integrates with other omics fields and benefits from computational advances, its role in precision oncology will expand, ultimately helping clinicians make more informed decisions and improving patient outcomes. The future of proteomics in cancer research is bright, promising a new era of personalized and targeted cancer care.