ISRG JOURNAL OF CLINICAL MEDICINE AND MEDICAL RESEARCH [ISRGJCMMR]

ISRG PUBLISHERS
Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Clinic.Medici.Medica.Res.
ISSN: 3048-8850 (Online)
Journal homepage: https://isrgpublishers.com/cmmr/
Volume – II, Issue - VI (November-December) 2025
Frequency: Bimonthly

Genetic Variability and Personalized Drug Response: Toward Implementation of Pharmacogenomics in Clinical Practice

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| **Received:** 03.12.2025 | **Accepted:** 07.12.2025 | **Published:** 09.12.2025

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Abstract

Interindividual variability in drug response remains a major challenge in clinical pharmacotherapy, contributing to suboptimal efficacy or serious adverse drug reactions. Pharmacogenomics — the study of how genetic variation affects drug response — offers the potential to tailor treatment based on a patient's unique genetic profile. This article reviews evidence that genetic polymorphisms in drug-metabolizing enzymes (e.g., cytochrome P450 family), transporters, and drug targets underlie substantial differences in pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics across populations. We discuss well-characterized pharmacogenes such as CYP2D6, CYP2C19, and CYP3A4 — their variant alleles and how these influence drug clearance, activation of prodrugs, or risk of toxicity. Advances from candidate-gene studies to genome-wide and rare-variant analyses are described. Challenges hindering clinical implementation — including limited evidence for many variants, rare variants' contribution, polygenic effects, and lack of consensus guidelines — are addressed. We propose methodological strategies for integrating pharmacogenomic testing into clinical workflows and highlight potential benefits for personalized medicine, including improved efficacy, reduced adverse events, and cost-effective therapy. Finally, we outline future directions, such as incorporating rare variants, using high-throughput sequencing, and developing robust clinical decision support.

Keywords: *pharmacogenomics; genetic polymorphism; drug metabolism; CYP2D6*

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17862630

1. Introduction

Drug therapy is a cornerstone of modern medicine. However, patients receiving the same drug at identical doses may exhibit widely divergent responses (Lesko, Schmidt et al. 2012). some may benefit greatly, others show no effect, and still others may suffer serious side-effects. This variability poses a fundamental challenge to effective and safe pharmacotherapy (Lu and disposition 1998). Traditional dosing regimens often rely on population-average responses rather than the individual characteristics that govern drug behavior in each patient. Among many factors influencing drug response — age, sex (Franconi and Campesi 2014), comorbidities, liver/kidney function, concomitant medications — genetic variation has emerged as a critical determinant.

The concept that inherited genetic differences can influence drug response dates back decades, marking the birth of the field known as Pharmacogenetics (Weber 2008). Over time, with advances in genomic technology, the scope expanded to a more comprehensive discipline — Pharmacogenomics — encompassing genome-wide variation affecting drug response, metabolism, transport and drug targets.

Pharmacogenomics aims to understand how genes influence both pharmacokinetic (what the body does to the drug) and pharmacodynamic (what the drug does to the body) processes (Martínez and Quiñones 2018). Genetic variants can alter the expression or activity of drug-metabolizing enzymes, transporter proteins, or receptors, leading to variation in absorption, distribution, metabolism, elimination (ADME), and drug sensitivity.

The promise of pharmacogenomics is profound: by profiling a patient's genome before prescribing, clinicians could anticipate how the patient will process a drug — whether the standard dose is appropriate, whether a drug is likely to be effective, or whether alternate therapy would reduce risk of toxicity (Rochon and Gurwitz 1995). In the context of increasing polypharmacy and the aging population, such tailored approaches could improve therapeutic outcomes, minimize adverse drug reactions, and reduce healthcare costs. Despite significant progress, the translation of pharmacogenomic knowledge into routine clinical practice remains limited (Squassina, Manchia et al. 2010). There are multiple barriers: many drug–gene associations lack robust clinical evidence; many identified variants are rare and poorly characterized; clinical guidelines are often lacking or inconsistent; and integration into clinical workflow (laboratory testing, result interpretation, decision support) is still evolving. This article reviews current evidence on genetic variation and drug response (Schärfe, Tremmel et al. 2017), outlines methodological approaches, examines challenges for implementation, and suggests a framework for incorporating pharmacogenomics into everyday clinical care.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Genetic variation and early pharmacogenetics

The classical concept of pharmacogenetics focused initially on single genes encoding drug-metabolizing enzymes (Ingelman-Sundberg and Rodriguez-Antona 2005). Early studies documented differences in drug metabolism based on heredity (Ma, Woo et al. 2002); for example, individuals with enzyme deficiencies displayed prolonged drug half-lives or increased risk of toxicity (Fuhr 2000).

As genomics advanced, researchers recognized that many genes beyond the classical metabolizing enzymes could influence drug response — transporters, receptors, ion channels, and other proteins involved in drug disposition or action. This broader genomic perspective led to the adoption of the term "pharmacogenomics" encompassing genome-wide variation affecting drug response, metabolism, transport, and drug targets.

2.2 Key pharmacogenes: CYP enzymes, transporters, targets

Among the best-studied are the cytochrome P450 enzymes (CYPs), which mediate Phase I drug metabolism. Of the 57 human CYP enzymes (Coleman 2020), a subset — including CYP3A4, CYP2C9, CYP2C19, CYP2D6 — accounts for metabolism of a large proportion. The gene CYP2D6 is among the most polymorphic pharmacogenes: more than 70 allelic variants have been identified, including null alleles (no function), reduced-function alleles, normal-function, and gene duplications that lead to "ultrarapid metabolizer" phenotypes. CYP2D6 is responsible for the metabolism of ~20–25% of clinically used drugs, including antidepressants, antipsychotics, β-blockers, opioids, and more.

Similarly, variants in CYP2C19 affect metabolism of many drugs (e.g., proton-pump inhibitors, antiplatelet agents, antidepressants), leading to poor, intermediate, normal, or ultra-rapid metabolizer phenotypes. Recent reviews demonstrate how CYP2C19 polymorphism influences drug efficacy and safety across multiple specialties — cardiology, psychiatry, gastroenterology — underscoring its clinical relevance.

2.3 From candidate-gene to genome-wide and rare-variant studies

Early pharmacogenetic research largely focused on candidate genes — those already suspected to play a role, such as CYPs. But this approach misses unexpected contributors, and can't account for polygenic influences (Auwerx, Sadler et al. 2022). As genomic technologies matured, researchers began using genome-wide association studies (GWAS) and sequencing-based approaches to interrogate the full complement of human genetic variation. A recent important insight is that rare genetic variants — many of them unique to individuals or found in only a small fraction of the population — contribute substantially to functional variability in pharmacogenes (Ingelman-Sundberg, Mkrtchian et al. 2018). For example, analysis of 208 "ADME" (absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion) genes in a large population revealed that on average each individual harbors several rare functional variants — some affecting drug-metabolizing enzymes (Kozyra, Ingelman-Sundberg et al. 2017), others transporters or other relevant proteins.

Moreover, regulatory variants (noncoding), copy-number variations, structural variants (gene duplications or deletions), and non-CYP genes (e.g., drug targets, transporters).

3. Methodology

Given the broad heterogeneity of genetic influences on drug response, a multi-step, integrated methodology is needed for clinical implementation. Below we outline a proposed framework based on literature recommendations and current practices.

3.1 **Genetic testing panel design:** Use a comprehensive pharmacogene panel that includes common pharmacogenes (e.g., CYP2D6, CYP2C19, CYP2C9,

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CYP3A4, transporters, drug targets) as well as less common or rare variants. Employ next-generation sequencing (NGS) or array-based genotyping with copy-number variation (CNV) detection. This captures single-nucleotide variants, insertions/deletions, and structural variants.

3.2 **Phenotype inference:** Convert genotype data into predicted metabolizer phenotypes (e.g., poor, intermediate, normal, ultrarapid)(Gaedigk, Sangkuhl et al. 2017), based on established allele-function mappings (e.g., activity scores for CYP2D6) (Cicali, Elchynski et al. 2021). Use consensus frameworks such as those developed by expert consortia (e.g., Clinical Pharmacogenetics Implementation Consortium, CPIC).

3.3 **Clinical decision support (CDS):** Integrate test results into electronic health records with built-in alerts and prescribing guidance: e.g., recommended dose adjustments, alternative drugs, or enhanced monitoring when certain high-risk genotypes are detected.

3.4 **Outcome tracking and feedback:** Collect data on clinical outcomes (efficacy, adverse effects) after genotype-guided prescribing (Goulding, Dawes et al. 2015), enabling evaluation of real-world benefits and refining genotype–phenotype associations over time.

3.5 Ethical, legal, and social considerations: Ensure informed consent, data privacy, equitable access to testing across populations, and provider and patient education about limitations.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1 Evidence for clinically relevant genotype–drug response associations

For many commonly used drugs — antidepressants, antipsychotics, opioids, cardiovascular agents — genetic variation in key pharmacogenes leads to clinically meaningful differences in drug metabolism, efficacy, and toxicity (Kirchheiner, Nickchen et al. 2004). For example, CYP2D6 polymorphisms result in a spectrum from poor to ultrarapid metabolizers, affecting up to 20–25% of patients depending on population.

In psychiatry, genotype-guided prescribing (e.g., considering CYP2D6 and CYP2C19) has been shown in some case series to reduce adverse drug reactions and optimize antidepressant.

In oncology, variability in drug-metabolizing enzymes and drug transporters (e.g., variants in CYP3A4, membrane transporters) influences chemotherapy efficacy and toxicity.

4.2 Challenges and limitations

Incomplete genotype–phenotype mapping: While common variants are well studied, rare variants are abundant and may have functional consequences — yet most lack empirical data linking them to drug response. A large-scale exome study found that each individual carries on average multiple rare potentially functional variants in pharmacogenes. Missing heritability / unexplained variability: Even known variants explain only part of the variability. For instance, in the case of CYP3A activity (Zhai, van der Lee et al. 2022), classical PGx variants account for a fraction of interindividual differences; emerging evidence points to additional rare variants or non-genetic factors.

Polygenic and non-genetic influences: Drug response is rarely governed by a single gene. Polygenic interactions, gene–gene interactions, epigenetic regulation, environmental factors (diet, comorbidities (Glasspool, Teodoridis et al. 2006), other medications) all modify pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics.

Population diversity and allele frequency variation: Alleles common in one ethnic group may be rare or absent in others (Nature 2010). For example, the frequency of certain CYP2D6 alleles differs substantially across populations. Thus, pharmacogenomic recommendations based on one population may not generalize globally.

5. Conclusion

Pharmacogenomics offers a compelling path toward truly personalized medicine: tailoring drug therapies according to an individual's genetic makeup promises to optimize efficacy, minimize toxicity, and enhance overall therapeutic outcomes. Decades of research have identified key pharmacogenes — notably CYP2D6, CYP2C19, CYP3A4 whose genetic variants profoundly influence drug metabolism and response. Nevertheless, widespread clinical adoption remains limited due to challenges including incomplete genotype–phenotype knowledge, prevalence of rare variants, population-specific allele frequencies, and practical barriers in clinical implementation.

To realize the full potential of pharmacogenomics, future efforts should prioritize large-scale, ethnically diverse genomic studies; systematic characterization of rare and structural variants; integration of genetic data with environmental, clinical, and lifestyle factors; and development of robust clinical frameworks (testing, decision support, provider and patient education). With such efforts, pharmacogenomics could transform drug prescribing — moving from "one-size-fits-all" to truly individualized therapy.

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