Targeting Tumor Microenvironment by Small-Molecule Inhibitors

Shangwei Zhong*,†, Ji-Hak Jeong†, Zhikang Chen*, Zihua Chen* and Jun-Li Luo†

*The Hunan Provincial Key Lab of Precision Diagnosis and Treatment for Gastrointestinal Tumor, Xiangya Hospital, Central South University, Hunan, 410008, China; †Department of Molecular Medicine, The Scripps Research Institute, Jupiter, FL 33458, USA

Abstract

The tumor microenvironment (TME) is a hypoxic, acidic, and immune/inflammatory cell–enriched milieu that plays crucial roles in tumor development, growth, progression, and therapy resistance. Targeting TME is an attractive strategy for the treatment of solid tumors. Conventional cancer chemotherapies are mostly designed to directly kill cancer cells, and the effectiveness is always compromised by their penetration and accessibility to cancer cells. Small-molecule inhibitors, which exhibit good penetration and accessibility, are widely studied, and many of them have been successfully applied in clinics for cancer treatment. As TME is more penetrable and accessible than tumor cells, a lot of efforts have recently been made to generate small-molecule inhibitors that specifically target TME or the components of TME or develop special drug-delivery systems that release the cytotoxic drugs specifically in TME. In this review, we briefly summarize the recent advances of small-molecule inhibitors that target TME for the tumor treatment.

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Introduction

The tumor microenvironment (TME) is a hypoxic and acidic milieu constituted of cellular and noncellular components. The cellular component is composed of various stromal cells, including endothelial cells (ECs), cancer-associated fibroblasts (CAFs), myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs), and tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs). The noncellular component includes nonsoluble or semisoluble substances, such as the extracellular matrix (ECM), and soluble substances, such as interstitial fluids, various cytokines and chemokines, growth factors, and metabolites [1–5]. TME is not only intrinsically immunosuppressive to protect tumor cells from immune surveillance but also dynamically adaptive to accommodate rapid tumor growth and progression and to counter any stress and insult conditions, such as chemotherapy [6,7]. TME is an essential part of the tumor mass, which is important for tumor growth, progression, metastasis, and therapy resistance [4,6,8]. Therefore, targeting TME would be an efficient way for the treatment of cancer. Indeed, many strategies have been developed to target the TME. As small molecules can easily access TME than can penetrate into tumor cells, development of small-molecule inhibitors that specifically target TME is one of the rapidly growing areas in this field.

Small-molecule inhibitors are compounds with a small size (<500 Da). Compared with macromolecule agents, small-molecule inhibitors are more penetrative to the targets and usually can be engineered to be suitable for oral administration [9–12]. Many small-molecule inhibitors have been successfully applied to treat a wide range of cancers, and much more are currently in either clinical trials or ongoing development. For example, sunitinib (Sutent), a multiple-tyrosine kinase inhibitor of vascular endothelial growth factor receptor (VEGFR), oncogene c-KIT (KIT), receptor tyrosine kinase and platelet-derived growth factor receptor (PDGFR), has been approved as a potent antiangiogenesis drug and is applied to treat various tumors [9,13].

Recently, many small-molecule inhibitors have been developed to specifically or mainly target TME. These small molecules are designed...
to interrupt the specific features of TME, including the hypoxic, acidic, inflammatory milieu, as well as the abnormal ECM network in TME. Here, we briefly review the recent advances in the development of therapeutic small-molecule inhibitors that target TME.

Targeting Hypoxia in the TME

Hypoxia is one of the prominent features of TME. The rapid proliferation of cancer cells speeds up the consumption of oxygen, resulting in reduced oxygen level in solid tumor areas [14]. The disorganized vascular networks in tumor site that induce diffusion distance of oxygen also contribute to low oxygen level in TME [6,14,15]. In addition, tumor-associated and/or therapy-induced anemia causes a decreased O₂ transport capacity of the blood, leading to hypoxia in tumor sites [16]. Hypoxia is associated with tumor metastasis, radiotherapy/chemotherapy resistance, and poor prognosis [15,17]. In hypoxic environment, tumor cells can use many mechanisms to survive, including shifting from aerobic to anaerobic metabolism, erythropoietin (EPO) production, deregulating DNA repair systems, recruiting the stromal components, as well as upregulating protooncogenes and hypoxia-inducible factor (HIF) 1α and HIF 2α [18,19]. For a detailed review of targeting hypoxia in cancer therapy, please refer to a recent publication by Wilson and Hay [20]. To exploit the unique feature of hypoxia in TME, the therapeutic agents are often designed as low-toxicity prodrugs in normoxia environment while selectively activated in hypoxic tumor areas (Figure 1). Papadopoulos et al. [21] designed the hypoxia-activated prodrug AQ4N (banoxantrone) that is converted into AQ4, a potent inhibitor of topoisomerase II, in hypoxic areas. This prodrug is applied to treat advanced solid tumors such as bronchoalveolar lung cancer and ovarian cancer. Weiss et al. [22] designed a hypoxia-activated prodrug TH-302 that is consisted of 2-nitroimidazole, a hypoxia trigger, and a brominated version of isophosphoramide mustard (Br-IPM). This prodrug remains intact in normal oxygen conditions and can be activated in severe hypoxic conditions (<0.5% O₂).

Figure 1. Hypoxia-targeted therapy. The hypoxia in TME is resulted from several factors. Some hypoxia-activated prodrugs or hypoxia-targeting nanoparticle drug-delivery system are developed to inhibit the growth of cancer cells. TME, tumor microenvironment; ECM, extracellular matrix; EPR, enhanced permeability and retention effect.
O$_2$) to release Br-IPM, a DNA cross-linking agent. TH-302 shows antitumor activities in metastatic melanoma and small cell lung cancer (SCLC). Another hypoxic cell toxin is tirapazamine (TPZ), which preferentially shows cytotoxic activity to hypoxic cancer cells. The underlying mechanism is that TPZ forms a radical by adding an electron under the catalytic action of various intracellular reductases. This TPZ radical is highly reactive and can lead to DNA single- or double-strand breaks in hypoxic environment. However, under aerobic conditions, the TPZ radical is back-oxidized into its nontoxic parent, and its cytotoxicity is rapidly reduced [15,23]. Another strategy is to design a delivery system that releases the carried-on drug preferentially in hypoxic microenvironment. For instance, Huo et al. [24] reported a size-tunable nanocluster bomb with an initial size of approximately 33 nm featuring a long half-life during blood circulation and destructed to release small hypoxia microenvironment-targeting nanoparticles (NPs) to achieve deep tumor penetration. The small-molecule inhibitors that target hypoxic TME are summarized in Table 1 [21–23,25].

**Targeting the Acidic TME**

The extracellular pH in normal tissues is ~7.4, while the pH value in TME is much lower (~6.7–7.1) [26]. There are many mechanisms for the formation of acidic pH in tumors. Tumor cells use aerobic glycolysis as a major energy metabolism pathway in hypoxic environment, leading to increased production of lactic acid and H$^+$ which are subsequently released in TME through passive diffusion and active membrane-based ion transport [27]. The H$^+$-ATPases, Na$^+${/}-H$^+$ exchanger NHE1, as well as monocarboxylate-H$^+$ efflux cotransporter MCT1 and MCT4 are highly increased or/and activated in tumor cells, which drive H$^+$ efflux [26,28–30]. In addition, the carbonic anhydrase 9 (CA9), which is overexpressed in many types of cancer, also participates in the maintenance of low pH in TME [31,32]. In addition, tumor cells can induce oxidative stress to their neighboring stromal cells such as CAFs and TAMs by producing reactive oxygen species (ROS), which lead to mitochondrial dysfunction in CAFs and TAMs, resulting in accumulation of lactate in TME [33,34] (Figure 2). In addition, several mechanisms including the adaptation to hypoxia, oncogene activation, uncontrolled cell growth, and deficiencies in tumor perfusion due to the disorganized vascular networks also contribute to the tumor acidic microenvironment [35].

The dysregulated pH in TME contributes to tumor progression, invasion, metastasis, and chemoresistance, and therefore, targeting acidic TME is a desirable tumor therapeutic strategy [26,35–39]. Some small-molecule inhibitors targeting acidic TME are developed (Table 1) (Figure 2) [40–52]. In addition, efforts have recently been made to develop pH-responsive drug-release systems that deliver cytotoxic chemotherapy drugs specifically to acidic microenvironment (Figure 2). Zhang et al. [53] established a drug delivery system for targeting tumor acidic microenvironment via modifying pH (low) insertion peptide (pHLIP) on mesoporous organosilica nanoparticles (MONs), in which the doxorubicin (DOX) is loaded and can be released in response to glutathione and low pH in TME. Chen et al. developed another pH-responsive delivery system using polyethylene glycol (PEG)–DOX-encapsulated aza-BODIPY nanotheranostic agent. They linked DOX with PEG-benzaldehyde (PEG–CHO) via $\text{–HC=\text{N}–}$ bond to form a Schiff’s base, and then a near-infrared photosensitizer aza-BODIPY (AB) was encapsulated to form hydrophilic nanoparticles (DAB NPs). The $\text{–HC=\text{N}–}$ bond can be broken in acidic TME, resulting in the release of DOX specifically in the tumor site [54].

**Targeting Immune and Inflammatory Signaling in TME**

The immune system is implicated in both tumor initiation and progression, and immune cells are enriched in TME in some solid tumor such as prostate cancer [57,58]. Some immune cells in TME, for instance TAMs and myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSC$_2$), are tumor-promotive, while the immune activity of other cells, for instance CD8$^+$ cells of TILs, is suppressed in TME [5,59,60]. Many therapeutic strategies have been tested for the treatment of cancer through inhibiting the tumor-promotive cells and their signaling or reversing/reconstituting the function of TILs. The small-molecule inhibitors that target immune cells or/and the inflammatory signaling are developed and summarized in Table 2 [61–76].

TAMs are one of the most abundant and crucial cell components in TME. A high presence of TAMs in TME is significantly associated with poor prognosis of patients [77,78]. The phenotype of TAMs is diverse and plastic. There are 17 TAM phenotypes being identified based on single-cell analysis [79], and these subsets are potential targets for therapy. The strategies that suppress M2-type TAM recruitment, survival, and the relevant signaling cascades or reprogram M2-type TAMs to an M1 phenotype have been proposed for the treatment of cancer [3,80–82]. Some small-molecule inhibitors that target TAMs or TAM-associated signals have been developed (Table 2) [61–67].

MDSCs are a heterogeneous group of myeloid cells with an immature phenotype that expand in response to various tumor-derived cytokines such as granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF) and interleukin (IL)-6 [83–86]. MDSCs are associated with tumor progression, metastasis, and poor clinical prognosis [87–89]. MDSCs play important roles in the maintenance of the immunosuppressive TME through affecting the interactions between cancer cells and immune effectors [90]. MDSCs can release high levels of Arginase-1 in TME, leading to L-arginine depletion (a crucial nutrient for lymphocytes) that inhibits T-cell function. MDSCs also suppress dendritic cells (DCs)–mediated activation of T cells [91–93]. DCs act as a key cellular sensor to capture danger events such as invading microbes in the environment and provide necessary signals for T-cell activation, thereby shaping immune responses [94,95]. Targeting MDSC expansion or inhibiting their protumorigenic functions is a promising strategy to inhibit tumor progression. Some small-molecule inhibitors that target MDSCs or/and their associated signals have been developed and are summarized in Table 2 [68–72].

TILs are a complex group of T lymphocytes infiltrated in TME [96]. TILs have different subpopulations with different even opposite roles in immune responses. For instance, the subset of CD4$^+$CD25$^+$FOXP3$^+$ regulatory T (Treg) cells suppress tumor-specific T-cell immunity and are associated with poor prognosis in ovarian carcinoma [97], and tumor-infiltrating CD4$^+$CD25$^+$FOXP3$^+$ Treg cells showed promotastatic function in receptor activator of nuclear factor-$\kappa$B (RANK)-expressing breast/mammary cancer cells [98]. However, the CD8$^+$ TILs are positively correlated with patients’ overall survival in many cancer types, including cutaneous angiosarcoma, esophageal carcinomas, and non-small cell lung cancers (NSCLCs) [99–101]. Some small-molecule inhibitors that either enhance the function of CD8$^+$ T cells or inhibit Treg cell proliferation and cytokine production have been developed (Table 2) [73–76].
| Target                  | Small-molecular Inhibitor                                                                 | Target Strategy                        | Mechanism of Action                                                                 | Cancer Target                                          | References |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Hypoxia                 | Hypoxia-activated prodrug AQ4N (banoxantrone)                                            | Inhibit tumor growth and progression   | Be converted into AQ4, a potent inhibitor of topoisomerase II, in hypoxic areas       | Bronchoalveolar lung cancer and ovarian cancer         | [21]       |
| Hypoxia                 | Hypoxia-activated prodrug TH-302                                                         | Inhibit tumor growth                   | Release brominated version of isophosphoramide mustard (Br-IPM) in hypoxic areas    | Small cell lung cancer (SCLC) and melanoma            | [22]       |
| Tirapazamine (TPZ)      | TH-302                                                                                   | Show preferentially cytotoxic activity to hypoxic cells   | Form a reactive radical under the catalytic action of various intracellular reductases | Squamous cell carcinoma                                | [23]       |
| PR-104                  | [2-((2-bromoethyl)-2-((2-hydroxyethyl)aminocarbonyl-4,6-dinitroanilino)ethyl methanesulfonate phosphate ester] | Be converted into cytotoxic drug, hydroxylamine PR-104H, selectively under hypoxia, resulting in suppression of growth of hypoxic and aerobic cells | DNA cross-linking                                      | Pancreatic and prostate tumors                         | [25]       |
| AcidicMICROENVIRONMENT  | Esomeprazole (ESOM)                                                                       | pH neutralization                      | Alter tumor pH by inhibiting proton extrusion                                        | Melanoma                                              | [40]       |
|                        | Omeprazole                                                                               | pH neutralization                      | Inhibit V＋H＋-ATPase activity and alter extracellular pH                               | Colon, breast, ovarian cancer, melanoma               | [41]       |
|                        | Bicarbonate                                                                              | pH neutralization                      | Increase tumor extracellular pH and reduce the formation of spontaneous metastases   | Breast and prostate cancer                             | [42]       |
|                        | 4,4’-Disothiocyanostilbene-2,2'-disulfonic acid (DIDS)                                   | Induce cell growth arrest and cell apoptosis | Inhibit anion exchangers (AEs)                                                     | Hepatocellular carcinoma                              | [55]       |
|                        | 2-Cyano-4-hydroxycinnamate (CHC) (combined with radiotherapy)                            | Retard tumor growth and render the remaining cancer cells sensitive to irradiation    | Inhibit monocarboxylate transporter 1 (MCT1)                                         | Lung carcinoma and colorectal adenocarcinoma          | [56]       |
|                        | Sulfonamide-based CAIX inhibitors (CAI17 and U-104)                                      | Inhibit tumor growth, metastasis formation and deplete cancer stem cells              | Inhibit CAIX activity                                                                  | Breast cancer                                         | [43-45]    |
|                        | Glycosylcoumarins (GC-204 and GC-205)                                                    | Inhibit tumor growth and metastasis formation | Inhibit CAIX activity                                                                  | Breast cancer                                         | [43]       |
|                        | Small organic ligands (such as AAZ)                                                      | Retard tumor growth, reduce metastasis and tumor stem cell expansion                 | Inhibit CAIX activity                                                                  | Renal cell carcinoma                                   | [50]       |
|                        | Acetazolamide (combined with ramapycin)                                                  | Inhibit tumor growth and potentiate the anticancer activity of rapamycin              | Inhibit CAIX activity                                                                  | Colorectal adenocarcinoma                              | [51]       |
|                        | SLC-0111 (combined with dacarbazine, temozolomide, doxorubicin, and 5-fluorouracil)     | Potentiate the cytotoxic effects of conventional chemotherapeutic drugs              | Inhibit CAIX activity                                                                  | Melanoma, breast and colon cancer                      | [52]       |
|                        | 2-Aminophenoxazine-3-one (Phx-3)                                                        | Disturb intracellular pH homeostasis, leading to apoptotic and cytotoxic events       | Inhibit NHE1 activity                                                                  | Gastric cancer                                        | [46]       |
|                        | Cariporide                                                                               | Regulate intracellular pH reduce proliferation and induce apoptosis                   | Inhibit NHE1 activity                                                                  | Cholangiocarcinoma, breast cancer                      | [47-49]    |
|                        | S3705                                                                                   | Regulate intracellular pH reduce proliferation, and induce apoptosis                   | Inhibit the Na＋-dependent Cl－/HCO3 exchange activity                                 | Cholangiocarcinoma                                    | [48]       |
Targeting immune checkpoint, for instance, antibodies binding to programmed death 1 (PD-1) or programmed cell death 1 ligand 1 (PD-L1), has shown remarkable efficacy for cancer therapy. However, most immune checkpoint inhibitors currently used in clinic or in clinical trials are antibody drugs, which have some disadvantages such as immunogenicity. Immune checkpoint small-molecule inhibitors could offer inherent advantages in terms of pharmacokinetics and druggability. Many efforts have been made to develop immune checkpoint small-molecule inhibitors. The small-molecule inhibitors targeting PD-1 or PD-L1 have been well summarized by Li and Tian [102] in a recent review.

Targeting CAFs and ECs

CAFs are heterogeneous with various origins, including resident fibroblasts, mesenchymal cells, epithelia, and endothelia cells via epithelial/endothelial—mesenchymal transition [104,105]. CAFs are an essential component of TME and play an indispensable role in tumor development [105,106]. CAFs secrete various cytokines, chemokines, growth factors, and other factors such as WNT16B, which promote tumorogenesis, metastasis, chemoresistance, angiogenesis, and cancer stem cell self-renewal [105,107]. CAFs express several specific markers, such as fibroblast activation protein (FAP), alpha smooth muscle actin (α-SMA), vimentin, S100A4 protein, fibroblast-specific protein-1 (FSP-1), insulin-like growth factor—binding protein 7 (IGFBP7), and Thy-1 [108–112]. These CAF markers not only make CAFs identifiable from normal counterparts but also can be used as specific therapeutic targets for tumor treatment. Some small-molecule inhibitors that target CAFs have been developed (Table 3) [113–120]. In addition, the CAFs markers can be exploited as a drug delivery tool. For example, an FAP-specific peptide is coupled to a potent cytotoxic natural plant product thapsigargin (TG), which can be cleaved by the membrane-bound post-prolyl endopeptidase FAP in TME, resulting in TG release specifically in TME [121].

Endothelial cells (ECs) are mostly quiescent and slowly proliferated in normal tissues of adults [122,123], while ECs in tumors are activated and possess high proangiogenic properties [124]. As a result, the morphologies and gene expression of tumor-associated ECs are very different compared with those in normal ECs. The tumor-associated ECs upregulate several angiogenesis-related genes and markers, such as aminopeptidase N (APN) and tumor endothelial marker 8 (TEM8) [125]. The tumor vessels are disorganized, irregular, fragile, and leaky, resulting in abnormal blood flow in tumor [126]. The disorganized tumor vessels hinder the delivery of drugs to some tumor sites and impair the efficacy of chemotherapy. Therefore, some therapeutic strategies are designed to normalize tumor vasculature, which can alleviate hypoxia in tumor and increase the efficacy of therapies [127]. Because the tumor endothelium dysfunction helps to sculpt the microenvironment and establish an immunosuppressed TME necessary for tumor progression and metastasis [128], targeting tumor-associated ECs is a very promising strategy for the tumor treatment. It has been reported that some naturally occurring endogenous angiogenesis inhibitors act as tumor suppressor proteins or peptides that block the angiogenic switch in tumors [129]. Small-molecule inhibitors designed to specifically target tumor-associated ECs are summarized in Table 3 [130–138].
TAMs, tumor-associated macrophages; TILs, tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes; DCs, dendritic cells; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; MDSCs, myeloid-derived suppressor cells; IL, interleukin.

TILs SB415286 Enhance the function of CD8

DCs Paclitaxel (noncytotoxic dose) Attenuate the propagation of regDC Target Rho GTPase remodeling Lung cancer [72]

The ECM contains more than one hundred proteins, which are organized into a structural framework and act as a scaffold [144,145]. The major components of the ECM are fibrous proteins and proteoglycans including fibronectin, collagen, and hyaluronan (HA). The ECM also contains various growth factors, cytokines, and chemokines secreted by tumor cells and stromal cells. For example, vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) in TME, secreted by tumor cells, CAFs, and inflammatory cells, plays important roles in ECM remodeling. The combination of chemotherapeutic regimen gemcitabine with PEGPH20 for the treatment of pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma has shown objective tumor responses and nearly doubled overall survival [159,160]. HYAL, an enzyme that catalyzes the degradation of HA, promotes DOX penetration and its cell killing effect [161]. In addition, HA is an anionic cell surface—associated polysaccharide, which facilitates HA binding to the CD44 receptor overexpressed in most of cancer cells. Thus, HA has been exploited as a part of delivery tool to transport drug to tumor cells [162–164].

Matrix Metalloproteinase Protein

Matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) are a family of zinc-dependent endopeptidases. MMPs are synthesized as inactivezymogens, which are subsequently activated by serine proteinases or other MMPs in the microenvironment [165]. Because MMPs can cleave almost all components of the ECM, they play important roles in ECM remodeling. Accumulated evidence has shown that increased expression or/and activation of MMPs is involved in the processes of carcinogenesis, invasion, and metastasis [166]. Several small-molecule inhibitors selectively targeting MMPs have been developed (Table 4) [150,151]. In addition to being a direct target for cancer therapy, MMPs have also been used as part of drug delivery tools that release the cytotoxic drugs specifically in TME. Sun et al. integrated the chemotherapy drug paclitaxel into nanoparticles that is modified with an MMP-cleavable linker and a cell-penetrating peptide. This functionalized nanoparticle showed a high affinity to both tumor cells and TAMs, and the integrated paclitaxel was effectively delivered and released into the tumor site owing to high levels of MMPs in TME [167].

Lysophosphatidic Acid

Lysophosphatidic acid (LPA) is a crucial component of TME. LPA is mainly produced from lysophosphatidylcholine (LPC) by a secreted enzyme, autotaxin (ATX). LPA activates six G protein–coupled
Table 3. Small-Molecule Inhibitors Target Cancer-associated Fibroblasts and Endothelial Cells in TME

| Target | Small-molecular Inhibitor | Target Strategy | Mechanism of Action | Cancer Target | References |
|--------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|
| CAFs   | PT-100 (combined with oxaliplatin) | Inhibit CAFs and reduce chemoresistance | Target fibroblast activation protein | Colon cancer | [113] |
| CAFs   | RNK5755                  | Inhibit CAF migration | Bind to β-arrestin 1 and interfere with β-arrestin 1—mediated cofilin signaling pathways. | Breast cancer | [114] |
| CAFs   | mPGES-1 inhibitor compound III (CIII) | Reduce tumor growth, impair angiogenesis, inhibit CAFs migration and infiltration, and favor shift in the M1/M2 macrophage ratio | Block CAF-derived prostaglandin E2 (PGE2) production | Neuroblastoma tumor | [115] |
| CAFs   | Scrippta | Repress TGFβ-mediated CAF differentiation and inhibit ECM secretion | Alter the cellular epigenetic regulatory machinery via HDAC inhibition | Melanoma | [116] |
| CAFs   | LE135 and bicalutamide (combined with ciplatin) | Suppress CAF-facilitated oncogenesis and reduce chemoresistance | Retinoic acid receptor β and androgen receptor antagonists | Squamous cell carcinoma | [117] |
| CAFs   | AC1MMYR2 (combined with taxol) | Reprogram CAFs, suppress tumor migration and invasion ability | Reprogram CAFs via the NF-κB/miR-21/VHL axis | Breast cancer | [118] |
| CAFs   | SOM230 (combined with gencatnine) | Reprogram CAFs and reduce chemoresistance | Activate the sst1 receptor and inhibit the mTOR/4E-BP1 pathway and the resultant synthesis of secreted CAF proteins | Pancreatic cancer | [119] |
| CAFs   | Navitoclax | Trigger CAF apoptosis and suppress tumor outgrowth | Upregulate the proapoptotic protein Bax and diminish expression of the desmoplastic extracellular matrix protein tenasin C | Cholangiocarcinoma | [119] |
| CAFs   | WRG-28 | Inhibit tumor invasion and migration | Inhibit receptor–ligand interactions via allosteric modulation of the collagen receptor discoidin domain receptor 2 (DDR2) | Breast cancer | [120] |
| ECs    | PD173074 (combined with verteporfin) | Reduce proliferation of CAFs and ECs suppress fibroblast-enhanced tumor cell growth and inhibit tumor growth | Inhibit fibroblast growth factor receptor (FGFR) | Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) | [120] |
| ECs    | DIMP35-1 | Induce cancer cell apoptosis, inhibit the migration and tube formation of ECs and inhibit angiogenesis | Bind to p53 inhibiting its interaction with MDM2 and MDMX | Colon cancer | [130] |
| ECs    | BEZ235 (combined with verapamil) | Enrich vascular-targeted photodynamic therapy inhibit endothelial cell proliferation and suppress tumor growth | Inhibit PI3K pathway activation | Prostate cancer | [141] |
| ECs    | Biochanin A | Inhibit ECs functions such as cell viability, migration, invasion, and tumor progression | Inhibit activation of prosangiogenic proteins (ERK/β-catenin), inhibit chemical hypoxia-inducible factor-1α and vascular endothelial growth factor | Angiogenic gliomas | [131] |
| ECs    | LLLL12 | Reduce proliferation/migration of ECs and inhibit VEGF-induced tube formation, suppress tumor growth | Inhibit VEGF-stimulated STAT3 phosphorylation in ECs | Osteosarcoma | [132] |
| ECs    | TW-37 (combined with radiotherapy) | Abrogate new endothelial cell sprouting, inhibit tumor growth | Inhibit Bcl-2 | Head and neck cancer | [133] |
| ECs    | CX-4945 | Inhibit EC migration, tube formation, cause cell-cycle arrest and selectively induce apoptosis in cancer cells | Attenuate P13K/Akt signaling and block CK2-dependent HIF-1α transcription | Breast and pancreatic cancer | [134] |
| ECs    | CC-5079 | Inhibit ECs, fibroblast, cancer cell proliferation and migration, inhibit microvesSEL formation | Stimulate MKP1 expression in ECs and fibroblast | Colon cancer | [135] |
| ECs    | Duatinib | Inhibit mortality and other functions of ECs and myeloid cells, suppress tumor growth associated with increased tumor cell apoptosis, decreased microvesSEL density | Inhibit phosphorylation of SFKs and downstream signaling, reduce matrix metalloproteinase (MMP)-9 levels in TME | Prostate cancer and colon cancer | [136] |
| ECs    | Pazopanib (GW786034B) | Block cancer cell growth, survival, and migration, and inhibit VEGF-induced up-regulation of adhesion molecules on ECs and tumor cells and decrease angiogenesis | Inhibit VEGF-triggered signaling pathways | Multiple myeloma and metastatic renal-cell cancer | [137,142] |
| ECs    | TNP-470 | Inhibit vascular hyperpermeability of tumor blood vessels | Inhibit VPF/VEGF-induced phosphorylation of vascular endothelial growth factor receptor-2, calcium influx, and RhoA activation in ECs | Melanoma, glioblastoma and breast cancer | [138] |
| ECs    | Sunitinib(SU11248) | Cause regression, growth arrest, or substantially reduced growth of cancer cells | Target the vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF), KIT, and FLT3 receptor tyrosine kinases | Epidermoid carcinoma, colon carcinoma and metastatic renal-cell cancer | [142,143] |

CAFs, cancer-associated fibroblasts; ECs, endothelial cells; TME, tumor microenvironment.
**Small-Molecule Inhibitors Target Extracellular Matrix Components**

| Target | Small-molecular Inhibitor | Mechanism of Action | Reference(s) |
|--------|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Hyaluronan (HA) | 4-methylumbelliferone (MU) | Lower HA levels | [145,147–149] |
| | | Inhibit HAS to synthesize HA | | |
| | | Abrogate MMP-9 homodimerization and block hemopexin (PEX) domain of matrix | [147,149] |
| | | Inhibit MMP-9-mediated cell migration related signaling pathway | | |
| Lysophosphatidic acid (LPA) | ONO-8430506 | Decrease lysophosphatidate signaling | [150] |
| | | Inhibit activity of secreted enzyme, autotaxin (ATX) | | |
| | | Inhibit activity of secreted enzyme, urokinase | [150] |
| | | Target non-collagenous proteinase 1 (NCSP1) | | |
| Collagen | 3-[4-(difluoromethoxy)phenyl]-2-[(4-oxo-6-propyl-1H-pyrimidin-2-yl)sulfanyl]-acetamide | Impair the formation of mesh collagen IV and impede tumor EMT | [152] |
| | | Target mesenchymal goodpasture antigen-binding protein (GPBP) and disturb its multimerization | | |

**Conclusions and Perspectives**

Conventional cancer chemotherapies are mostly designed to directly kill cancer cells, and the effectiveness is always compromised by their penetration and accessibility to cancer cells. Small-molecule inhibitors, which exhibit good penetration and accessibility as compared with other large molecules, are widely studied, and most of them are designed to attack cancer cells directly. TME is a complicated and dynamic system, which is an indispensable part of tumor as a whole. As TME is more penetrable and accessible than tumor cells, many efforts have been made to develop therapeutic strategies that target TME. A large number of small-molecule inhibitors that target TME have been developed, many of which are still at the early stages in preclinical and clinical trials. These small-molecule inhibitors are designed to specifically target TME or the components of TME or to be delivered and released specifically in TME.

As there are rapid advances in understanding the underlying mechanisms of the interaction between tumor cells and TME, more and more specific targets in TME will be emerged as druggable targets. As there are rapid advances in understanding the underlying mechanisms of the interaction between tumor cells and TME, more and more specific targets in TME will be emerged as druggable targets.

Inhibition of immune regulatory checkpoints, such as CTLA-4 and the PD-1–PD-L1 axis, is currently at the forefront of immunotherapy for cancers of various histological types. However, the CTLA-4 and PD-1/PD-L1 antibodies currently available for tumor immunotherapy are only effective for 20–30% of patients with solid tumor [180–182]. The complexity and heterogeneity of
the TME suggest that there would be other unknown important mechanisms leading to inhibition of T-cell killing and immune suppression. For the immune system to mount an adequate response to cancer, it must overcome a slew of obstacles. First, T cells that recognize tumor antigens must be sufficiently activated by antigen-presenting cells, and they need to (leave lymphoid system and reside beyond the lymphoid system) migrate and amass within tumors. Second, signals present within the harsh TME undermine the ability of the tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs), the CD8+ T cells, to fight cancer. Therefore, any strategies, particularly small-molecule inhibitors (or activators) that target TME to promote CD8+ T-cell infiltration in tumors and to prevent the development of a dysfunctional or "exhausted" T-cell state or reverse the function of dysfunctional or "exhausted" T cells, to fight cancer. Therefore, any strategies, particularly small-molecule inhibitors (or activators) that target TME to promote CD8+ T-cell infiltration in tumors and to prevent the development of a dysfunctional or "exhausted" T-cell state or reverse the function of dysfunctional or "exhausted" T-cells, would be highly desirable.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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