**Review Article**

**Fluorescent Carbon Dot-Supported Imaging-Based Biomedicine: A Comprehensive Review**

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Received 3 September 2021; Revised 27 September 2021; Accepted 17 March 2022; Published 10 April 2022

Academic Editor: Songwen Tan

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Carbon dots (CDs) provide distinctive advantages of strong fluorescence, good photostability, high water solubility, and outstanding biocompatibility, and thus are widely exploited as potential imaging agents for *in vitro* and *in vivo* bioimaging. Imaging is absolutely necessary when discovering the structure and function of cells, detecting biomarkers in diagnosis, tracking the progress of ongoing disease, treating various tumors, and monitoring therapeutic efficacy, making it an important approach in modern biomedicine. Numerous investigations of CDs have been intensively studied for utilization in bioimaging-supported medical sciences. However, there is still no article highlighting the potential importance of CD-based bioimaging to support various biomedical applications. Herein, we summarize the development of CDs as fluorescence (FL) nanoprobe variants with different FL colors for potential bioimaging-based applications in living cells, tissue, and organisms, including the bioimaging of various cell types and targets, bioimaging-supported sensing of metal ions and biomolecules, and FL imaging-guided tumor therapy. Current CD-based microscopic techniques and their advantages are also highlighted. This review discusses the significance of advanced CD-supported imaging-based *in vitro* and *in vivo* investigations, suggests the potential of CD-based imaging for biomedicine, and encourages the effective selection and development of superior probes and platforms for further biomedical applications.

1. Introduction

Bioimaging plays a significant role in understanding the structure and biological processes of biomolecules, living cells, tissues, organs, and organisms [1]. Imaging has rapidly become an essential approach in biomedical applications due to its possibility to improve the prevention, detection, and treatment of disease. The powerful bioimaging techniques of fluorescence microscopy (FM) make it a prerequisite for taking advantage of many medical applications in preclinical studies and clinical interventions, by providing excellent imaging of anatomical structures and molecular imaging of specific biomarkers, as well as functional imaging of physiological activities [2, 3]. Compared to small fluorescent molecules (rhodamine, fluorescein, ...) or semiconductor quantum dots, highly fluorescent (FL) carbon dots (CDs) that exhibit more advanced properties are currently being developed for various applications owing to their unique properties, such as multicolor emissions, excellent photostability and biocompatibility, and easy surface functionalization [4]. They can be easily synthesized in a one-step process using microwave or hydrothermal methods with environmental friendliness and affordability. With non-toxicity, high water solubility, strong fluorescence, and two-photon excitation (TPE) capability, CDs are broadly utilized in live-cell imaging, catalysis, electronics, biosensing, targeted drug delivery, and imaging-guided biomedical applications [5]. Taking advantage of the strong fluorescence of CDs has accelerated the intensive investigation of the biomedical sciences, especially in bioimaging-supported fields, providing significant benefits in effective bioimaging-supported medicine. The combination between CDs and...
advanced imaging technologies might increase the precision and accuracy of biomedical applications.

Various reports in the literature have summarized the synthesis, properties, and applications of CDs, in the biosensing and theragnostic fields [5–8] to emphasize the applicable potential of CDs for biomedical applications. These reviews broadly discussed the applications of CDs including bioimaging, sensing, and therapy, without deeply focusing on bioimaging-based medicine. Imaging in modern bio-medicine is especially beneficial procedure in the interest of diagnosing, monitoring, or treating disease, making it extremely significant in medical fields. Therefore, an overview of bioimaging-supported biomedical sciences that focuses on the excellent bioimaging properties of CDs is needed to explore the potential significance of CDs in the field of imaging-supported medical applications. Hence, this review emphasizes the exploitation of current CD-based FL imaging as powerful nanoprobes for advanced biomedical applications that include pristine bioimaging, bioimaging-supported sensing platforms, and bioimaging-guided therapy. The carbon dot-supported microscopic techniques are highlighted, along with their advantages for effective bioimaging purposes. The latest research on the CD-based bioimaging-supported biomedical applications is also comprehensively reviewed. In particular, the imaging of different species targets (cells, organelles, bacteria, fungi, animals), the monitoring of various metal ions and biomolecules in live cells and tissue, and the imaging-guided therapeutics of tumors (Figure 1). This review provides an interesting focus on advanced innovation for further in vitro and in vivo investigation based on bioimaging to develop superior platforms for efficient healthcare study. The challenges and perspectives are also discussed for considering the future of these CD-supported imaging-based biomedical sciences.

2. Current Carbon Dot-Supported Microscopic Techniques

Microscopic imaging has paved the way for a revolution as a major technique for the visualization and understanding of the structure and physiology of cells and tissues that provides unprecedented insights into the biological processes related to physiological and disease processes, as well as supports various biomedical applications [9, 10]. There are two types of FM techniques that can or cannot overcome the resolution limit where the objects become unresolvable if the distance between the two-point objects is less than half of the wavelength of the excitation source, namely the diffraction-limited and super-resolution microscopy techniques, respectively. Diffraction-limited microscopy techniques consist of epifluorescence illumination microscopy, confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM), total internal reflection FM, and light-sheet FM, while super-resolution microscopy techniques include photoactivated localization microscopy, stochastic optical reconstruction microscopy, and ground-state depletion, followed by individual return microscopy, stimulated emission by depletion microscopy, structured illumination microscopy, binding-activation localization microscopy, and scanning near-field optical microscopy. Microscopic techniques are optimally selected depending on the spatial organization of the biological entity, temporal dynamics, and susceptibility to phototoxicity [11, 12]. For specific CD-supported microscopic techniques, scientists have mainly focused on the use of optical and electron microscopy techniques that include FM, CLSM, and single-photon and two-photon excitation microscopy for in vitro studies, and in vivo fluorescence imaging systems for in vivo studies, as shown in Table 1, which techniques are mainly applied in the fields of cell biology or biomedical sciences [115]. These FM techniques have been widely exploited using FL CDs for biomedical applications that include the imaging of cells and tissues, imaging-based sensing in vitro and in vivo, and imaging-guided therapy. CLSM obtains superior quality of FL images by improving the signal-to-noise ratio compared to widefield microscopy, two-photon excitation microscopy enables imagery of high depths, which is unachievable by single-photon excitation microscopy [94, 116–118]. Taking advantage of CDs, the CD-supported FM has been successfully exploited as an ideal candidate for diverse biomedical applications, such as providing active physiological processes through the imaging of species in live cells or tissues, as well as support for therapeutic applications to disease.

3. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for Bioimaging Applications

Table 1 summarizes the latest research of various CDs based on the precursors of synthesis, applied color, and excitation/emission wavelengths for bioimaging of various targets such as cells, organelles, bacteria, fungi, and animal models. Case studies of CD-based bioimaging are then discussed in this section, according to biotarget.

3.1. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging of Cells and Tissues. Various multicolor FL CDs have been widely fabricated and applied as excellent nanoprobes to effectively image cells and tissues. By simply mixing glucose as a carbon source, EDA as an N-dopant, and phosphoric acid as P-dopant, water-soluble FL nitrogen and phosphorus dual-doped carbon dots (NP-Cdots) of about 3.5 nm in diameter were rapidly synthesized by the acid-base neutralization spontaneous heat, and they exhibited multicolor fluorescence, with the optimal excitation and emission wavelengths at (403 and 502) nm, respectively. These biocompatible NP-Cdots were utilized as a multicolor FL agent for the intracellular imaging of human cervical carcinoma SiHa cells. The multicolor fluorescence of cells stained with NP-Cdots presented blue, green, yellow, and red Em under laser stimulation at 405, 488, 515, and 543 nm, respectively, showing internalization and good decentralization into the cytoplasm of SiHa cells, along with the entering of some NP-Cdots into the cell nucleolus. These results indicate the excellent ability of these NP-Cdots to permeate the cell membrane for the application in in vitro cellular imaging (Figure 2(a)) [25]. The double rare-earth-doped (gadolinium, ytterbium) carbon dots (Gd/Yb@
 CDs) of 5.26 nm in diameter were fabricated via a one-step hydrothermal process at 200°C for 10h using Na₂EDTA and L-arginine as raw materials, and GdCl₃ and YbCl₃ as dopants. These Gd/Yb@CDs exhibited Ex-dependent Em, with the strongest Em at 418 nm when excited at 340 nm, superhigh photostability without change of fluorescence intensity for 2h, and superior biocompatibility without toxicity to HeLa cells up to 1 mg/mL of Gd/Yb@CDs. The in vitro HeLa cells and in vivo nude mice treated with Gd/Yb@CDs displayed significant blue fluorescence with very weak interference from the autofluorescence of cells [73].

Various o-, m-, or p-phenylenediamines (pDA) with triethylenetetramine as precursors were used to synthesize the FL carbon dots with different colors for the imaging application of cellular ribonucleic acids (RNA). However, only m-phenylenediamines formed carbon dots (m-CDs) with a size of 2.75 nm, and maximum green Em at 510 nm under Ex at 360 nm demonstrated excellent ability to specifically bind to the cellular RNA of HEp-2 cells, allowing successful long-term real-time monitoring of RNA dynamics during cell apoptosis, mitosis, and proliferation. The RNA affinity of m-CDs is associated with the isoquinoline moieties and amines on the surface of m-CDs that bind to RNA through π-π stacking and electrostatic bonding, respectively. Furthermore, investigations of the in vivo zebrafish larvae body showed major accumulation in the lens, pronephros, intestine, and vessels, suggesting the efficient excretion of m-CDs after 48 h of incubation. Hence, m-CDs as smart nanoprobes for cellular RNA imaging could be valuable for the development of visualized screening of RNA [60]. Interestingly, hydrogen-bonding-induced Em CDs (HBIE-CDs) formed by a hydrothermal method using m-phenylenediamine (mDA) and folic acid (FA) as precursors displayed 460 nm of blue Em in nonhydrogen-bonding solution and 535 nm of green Em in hydrogen-bonding solution due to the inhibition of nonirradiation by a H-bond network. The HBIE-CDs possessed strong affinity toward nucleic acid as the donor of H-bond without interference, dramatically increasing 6-fold green fluorescence after binding with the DNA or RNA of Hela cells. After incubation of Hela cells with HBIE-CDs for 5 min, cells without washing exhibited strong green fluorescence in the nucleus after binding with DNA and RNA and almost no background fluorescence in the cytoplasm, which was almost similar to cells with PBS washing, allowing continuous monitoring of the cell nucleus without interruption (Figure 2(b)) [61]. Furthermore, monitoring the dynamics of DNA and RNA structures in live cells is essential for tracking cell behavior. However, the difficulty in fabricating a the nanoprobe that can distinguish between double-stranded DNA and single-stranded RNA, and cross multiple membrane barriers from the cell to the tissue level is still a challenge. Thus, a cationic carbon quantum dot of 2–3 nm in diameter and zeta potential at +20 mV synthesized from conductive carbon nanoparticles and p-phenylenediamine was successfully developed to address this challenge. The CD exhibited green fluorescence at 510 nm under 400 nm Ex, but significant fluorescence enhancement was obtained with the

![Image](image-url)
### Table 1: *In vitro* and *in vivo* bioimaging applications using FL CDs.

| Precursors/Forms                        | FL Color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application                                | Biotarget                              | Ref.   |
|----------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------|
| Ethylenediamine (EDA) into yeast extract solution | Green    | 405/–              | CLSM        | Bacterial viability evaluation             | *E. coli, S. aureus*                  | [13]   |
| Si-QAC, glycerol                       | Blue     | 360/473            | CLSM        | Gram-type identification                   | *S. aureus, M. luteus, B. subtilis*   | [14]   |
| Pluronic F-127, 4-chlorophenylboronic acid | Blue     | 380/400            | CLSM        | Detection of glucose-containing bacteria   | *E. coli, S. aureus*                  | [15]   |
| Tulsi leaves                           | Yellow/ Red | 360/435           | FM          | Imaging of bacteria                        | *E. coli, B. subtilis*                | [16]   |
| Choline bicarbonate, oleic acid        | Blue–red | 300–500/416–556    | FM          | Imaging of bacteria                        | *E. coli, Vibrio owensii, Bacillus cereus, and Vibrio alginolyticus* | [17]   |
| Roasted grams                          | Blue–red | 320–500/475–610    | FM          | Imaging of bacteria                        | *E. coli*                             | [18]   |
| Beer yeast                             | Blue     | 405/–              | CLSM        | Bacterial viability evaluation             | *E. coli*                             | [19]   |
| Thiourea, TAE                          | Blue     | 380/430–470        | FM          | Imaging of bacteria, cells                 | *E. coli, Pseudomonas, Staphylococcus, Klebsiella, and hBEC* | [20]   |
|                                         | Green    | 450/510–560        |             |                                            |                                        |        |
|                                         | Red      | 585–640            |             |                                            |                                        |        |
| 3-Aminophenylboronic acid, CA          | Blue     | 360/420            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | Hela                                  | [21]   |
| Collagen                               | Blue     | 370/–              | Two-photon  | Imaging of cells                           | RL-14                                 | [22]   |
| CA, urea, cupric chloride             | Blue     | 490/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | MCF-7                                 | [23]   |
| CA, PEI                                | Blue     | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | 3T3                                   | [24]   |
| EDA, H$_3$PO$_4$                       | Blue     | 405/422            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | SiHa                                  | [25]   |
|                                         | Green    | 488/500            |             |                                            |                                        |        |
|                                         | Yellow   | 515/570            |             |                                            |                                        |        |
|                                         | Red      | 543/650            |             |                                            |                                        |        |
| Aconitic acid, EDA                     | Blue     | 360/450            | FM          | Imaging of folate receptor-overexpressed cells | Hela, SMMC-7721                      | [26]   |
| Sucrose, EDA, and H$_3$PO$_4$           | Blue     | 402/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | HepG2 cells                           | [27]   |
| ATP, LaCl$_3$                          | Blue     | 350/460            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells, tissue                   | A549, nude mice                       | [28]   |
| D-Arginine, 4-Methylumbelliferone      | Blue     | 378/452            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | MC3T3                                 | [29]   |
| Resorcinol, EDA                        | Blue     | 230/326            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | OVCAR-3, MCF-7                        | [30]   |
| Watermelon juice, ethanol Crab shells  | Blue     | 355/439            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | HepG2                                 | [31]   |
|                                         | Blue     | 360/450            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                           | Hela                                  | [32]   |
| Precursors/Forms                                      | FL Color       | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application               | Biotarget                | Ref.    |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Diammonium hydrogen citrate, PEG-400                | Blue           | 370/432            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | BGC-823, CT26.WT          | [33]    |
| CA, dethylene glycol bis (3-aminopropyl) ether      | Blue           | 300/440            | FM          | Imaging of tissue         | Glioma                   | [34]    |
| Lily bulbs                                          | Blue           | 370/448            | FM          | Imaging of cells          | A549                     | [35]    |
| Succinic acid, glycerol                             | Blue           | 280–480/410–525    | FM          | Imaging of cells          | KVKU213                  | [36]    |
| Metformin hydrochloride, glucose anhydrous          | Blue           | 480/–              | FM          | Imaging of cells          | CT26.WT                  | [37]    |
| Urea, PEG                                           | Blue           | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | L929                     | [38]    |
| Saffron                                             | Green-blue     | 400/485            | FM          | Imaging of cells (rat)    | Olfactory mucosa cells    | [39]    |
| Alendronate sodium                                  | Blue           | 405/–              | FM          | Imaging of cells          | Bone marrow cells         | [40]    |
| EDA, starch                                         | Blue           | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | BHK                      | [41]    |
| Apple                                               | Blue           | 380/490            | FM          | Imaging of cells          | MDA-MB-231, A549, and HEK-293 | [42]    |
| Hongcaitai                                          | Blue           | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | HepG2                    | [43]    |
| CA, melamine                                        | Blue           | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | HepG2                    | [44]    |
| CA, p-phenylenediamine, borax                       | Blue           | 315/–              | FM          | Imaging of cells          | HepG2                    | [45]    |
| Tartaric acid, urea                                  | Blue           | –                  | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | MDA-MB-231               | [46]    |
| Acidic cotton linter waste                          | Blue           | 390/446            | FM          | Imaging of cells          | H2452, HUVEC             | [47]    |
| Quince fruit                                        | Blue           | 480/518            | FM          | Imaging of cells          | HT-29                    | [48]    |
| 1,6-hexanediamine                                   | Blue           | 410/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | MCF-7                    | [49]    |
| Dihydrochloride, dimethyl sulfoxide                 | Green          | 460/–              | –           | Imaging of cells          | MCF-7                    | [50]    |
| Citrus fruit peels                                   | Yellow Orange  | 480/–              | FM          | Imaging of cells          | MCF-7                    | [50]    |
| Gum olibanum resin                                   | Green          | 420–495/525        | FM          | Imaging of cells          | B16F10                   | [51]    |
| Adenosine disodium triphosphate                     | Red            | 543/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells          | HeLa                     | [52]    |
| Precursors/Forms | FL Color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application | Biotarget | Ref. |
|-----------------|----------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| CA, EDA, arginine | Blue | 330–380/– | FM | Imaging of cells | NIH 3T3, HEK 293, Hela, and MCF-7 | [53] |
| Green | 460–495/– | 530–550/– | | | | |
| Red | 460–495/– | 530–550/– | | | | |
| Thiourea, CA, D-Glucosamine hydrochloride, and triethylamine | Green | 368/505 | FM | Imaging of cells | HepG2, HL-7702 | [54] |
| Food waste | Blue | 360/435 | 405/410–460 | FM | Imaging of cells | HCT116 | [55] |
| Sugarcane | Blue | 488/500–530 | Green | 515/530–570 | Red | 559/575–675 | | 320–380/440 | |
| Hyperbranched polysiloxane | Blue | 405/450 | 488/488/– | FM | Imaging of cells | Mouse osteoblast | [57] |
| Prunus cerasifera fruits | Blue | 405/450 | 488/488/– | CLSM | Imaging of cells | HepG2 | [58] |
| Ginkgo fruits | Green | 405/480–580 | Green | 405/480–580 | CLSM | Imaging of cell nucleolus | HeLa | [61] |
| Triethylene tetramine, phenylenediamine, m-phenylenediamine, FA | Green | 360/510 | CLSM | Imaging of cellular RNA | HEp-2 | [60] |
| CA, PEI | Blue | 405/480–580 | Green | 405/480–580 | CLSM | Imaging of cell nucleolus | HeLa | [61] |
| Chitosan, EDA, mercaptosuccinic acid, and CD-RB | Green | 532/550 | CLSM | Imaging of mitochondrial-targeted cells | MCF-7 | [63] |
| Polyacrylic acid, EDA | Blue | 356/520 | FM | Imaging of cells | EM-6 bulb epidermal tissue | [64] |
| CDs@SiO2 | Green | | | | | |
| PEI, 4-formylphenylboronic acid | Blue | 360/462 | CLSM | Imaging of cells | Hela | [65] |
| CEL powder | Blue | 320/400 | 400/– | 480/– | CLSM | Imaging of cells | HeLa | [66] |
| CA, powder | Red | 488/678 | CLSM | Imaging of EGFR-overexpressed cells | HCC827 | [67] |
| 5,10,15,20-tetrakis(4-aminophenyl)porphyrin (TAPP) | Green | 800/480 | Two-photon FM | Imaging of cells | MDA-MB-231 | [68] |
| CA, guanidine carbonate | Green | 405/– | 488/– | 563/– | FM | Imaging of cells | Hela | [69] |
| Carbon powder, ammonia | Blue | 405/– | 488/– | 563/– | FM | Imaging of cells | Rat liver tissue | HeLa | [69] |
| CA CDs-PEI-ML | Green | 405/420–580 | CLSM | Imaging of lysosome-targeted cells | MDA-MB-231, MIDA-MB-68, and RPE1 | [72] |
| Starch, L-tryptophan, and CD-MIPGlcA | Blue | 371/452 | CLSM | Imaging of hyaluronan-targeted cells | [71] |
| p-phenylenediamine, aspartic acid | Green | 445/500 | CLSM | Imaging of cells | | |

Table 1: Continued.
| Precursors/Forms                      | FL Color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application                                      | Biotarget                     | Ref.  |
|--------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| Na2EDTA, GdCl3, YbCl3, and L-arginine| Blue     | 340/418            | FM          | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                          | [73]  |
| DL-malic acid                        | Cyan     | 405/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | Trout gill epithelial cells.  | [74]  |
| DL-malic acid                        | Purple   | 488/-              | CLSM        |                                                 |                               |       |
| DL-malic acid                        | Green    | 514/-              | CLSM        |                                                 |                               |       |
| DL-malic acid                        | Red      | 561/-              | CLSM        |                                                 |                               |       |
| DL-malic acid                        | Red      | 405/420–637        | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Carbon glassy, PEG-200               | Green    |                    | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| CA, EDA, GdCl3, and YbCl3            | Blue     | 405/450            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Adenosine triphosphate, graphene oxide| Green   | 488/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| CA, EDA, GdCl3, and DTPA             | Red      | 543/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of bacteria                             | S. aureus                     | [78]  |
| CA, thiourea, and 3-aminophenyl boronic acid | Blue | 354/445           | FM          | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| CA, thiourea, and 3-aminophenyl boronic acid | Blue | 405/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | HepG2, L929                   | [79]  |
| ZIF-8                                | Green    | 488/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                          | [80]  |
| p-phenylenediamine                   | Orange   | 514/633            | CLSM        | Imaging of tissues                              | Arabidopsis thaliana leaf     | [81]  |
| PEI600, poly(tetrafluoroethylene)    | Blue     | 348/460            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Polythiophene phenylpropionic acid   | Red      | 543/610            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                          | [83]  |
| Cds@Au                               | Blue     | 370/449            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                          | [84]  |
| CA, urea, and laurylamine            | Blue     | 360/430            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Bamboo leaves                         | Green    | 488/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Cds-CBBA-Dox                         | Red      | 530/600            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                | B16F1, HeLa                   | [87]  |
| p-phenylenediamine, phosphoric acid, and Mn(OAC)₂ | Yellow, Green | 465/570   | FM          | Imaging of cells                                | HepG2                         | [88]  |
| o-phenylenediamine                   | Blue     | 360–380/–460–480/–510–530/– | FM          | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| CA, EDA, and ginsenoside Re           | Green    | 473/–              | FM          | Measurement of cells                            |                               |       |
| AEAPMS                               | Green    | 530/560            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| GNR@SiO2@CD                          | Green    | 360/444            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| m-Phenylenediamine                   | Yellow   | 450/533            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| o-Phenylenediamine                   | Orange   | 530/574            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| p-Phenylenediamine                   | Blue     | 350–400/420–470    | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Poly(vinylpyrrolidone), L-cysteine    | Green    | 460–490/520        | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Platanus biomass                      | Red      | 510–550/590        | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Cyanobacteria powder                 | Green    | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Diammonium hydrogen citrate, urea    | Green    | 420/537            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| CA, EDA                              | Blue     | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| L-cystine, o-phenylenediamine        | Orange   | 560/595            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               |       |
| Platanus biomass                      | Green    | 360/476            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               | [93]  |
| Cyanobacteria powder                 | Green    | 405/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               | [94]  |
| Diammonium hydrogen citrate, urea    | Green    | 420/537            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               | [95]  |
| CA, EDA                              | Blue     | 405/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               | [96]  |
| L-cystine, o-phenylenediamine        | Orange   | 560/595            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells                                |                               | [97]  |
| Precursors/Forms                  | FL Color  | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application | Biotarget | Ref. |
|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| Protamine sulfate, PEG          | Red       | 560/628            | FM          | Imaging of cells | HEK-293  | [98] |
|                                  | Blue      | 405/–              |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Green     | 488/–              |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Red       | 594/–              |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Blue      | –/470              | CLSM        | Imaging of fungi | C. gloeosporioides | [99] |
|                                  | Green     | –/511              |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Yellow    | –/530              |             |             |           |      |
| Methyl red, EDA                  | Blue      | 405/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of fungi | Penicillium sp. | [100] |
|                                  | Green     | 488/–              |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Red       | 561/–              |             |             |           |      |
| Acacia concinna                  | Blue      | 350/443            | CLSM        | Imaging of bacteria | E. coli | [101] |
|                                  | Green     | 420/515            |             | Imaging of fungi | Asperillus aculeatus, Fomitopsis sp. | |
|                                  | Yellow    | 440/563            |             |             |           |      |
| Manilkara zapota                 | Blue      | 488/>515           | FM          | Imaging of nucleolus | Cancer/normal cell differentiation | |
|                                  | Green     | 542/612            | CLSM        | Imaging of nucleolus | MGC-803, Mel-RM, H7, HeLa, and SKOV3 | [102] |
|                                  | Yellow    | 500–560            |             | Imaging of nucleolus dsDNA | HeLa cells | [103] |
|                                  | Red       | 543/570–650        |             | Imaging of nucleolus ssRNA dsDNA/ssRNA differentiation | HeLa, A549 | [104] |
|                                  | Green     | 520/560            |             |             |           |      |
|                                  | Red       | 550/620            | CLSM        | Imaging of nucleolus ssRNA dsDNA/ssRNA differentiation | C. elegans | |
| Coal tar CDs-liposome            | Orange    | 535/605            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | U14 tumor-bearing mice | [109] |
|                                  | Red       | 520/605            | In vivo imaging system | Imaging of cells | HeLa tumor-bearing mice | |
| Carbon nanopowder, EDA, and glycerin | Green     | 400/486            | FM          | Imaging of bone | Zebrafish | [110] |
|                                  | Green     | 410/510            | FM          | In vivo imaging | Zebrafish | [111] |
| Aniline, EDA, urea               | Red       | 520/620            | In vivo imaging of tumor | Imaging of tumor | A549 tumor-bearing mice | [107] |
| CV acetate, wax-like PEG sample, SiC powders | Red       | 520/620            | In vivo imaging of tumor | Imaging of cell | SP2/0 | [113] |
| Wheat straw and bamboo residues  | Blue      | 420/–              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | S mmc-7721 tumor-bearing mice | |
|                                  | Red       | 540/–              | In vivo imaging system | Imaging of tumor | RAW 264.7 | [114] |
| CA, H₃PO₄, EDA                   | Green     | 340/430            | FM          | Imaging of cells | S GCG7901 tumor-bearing BALB/c mice | |
|                                  | Red       | 450/500            | In vivo imaging system | Imaging of tumor | | |
existence of DNA, up to 8-fold, due to the CD insertion into the grooves of dsDNA that restricted the rotation of the linkage bonds between the pDA and the CD core. In contrast to DNA, the presence of RNA induces the shift of Em fluorescence to red at around 620 nm under 540 nm Ex, because it leads to the formation of CD aggregates to make the strong fluorescent transit from green to red. Upon treatment of CD, the nuclei of a total of 12 cell types emitted strong green fluorescence under 488 nm Ex, while strong red fluorescence was observed in the cytoplasm under 542 nm Ex, due to the CD staining of DNA and RNA, respectively, indicating its ability to cross both the plasma and nuclear membranes to dye the target DNA and RNA. The CD’s ability to enter the intestinal pathway was confirmed through the greater concentration of CD in intestinal wall cells using the imaging of wireworms. Further, it was successfully applied to monitor DNA and RNA during cell division at different cell cycles, including prophase, metaphase, telophase, and interphase. CD’s selectivity towards DNA and RNA, and the excellent ability to penetrate
through various biological barriers in cells and live organisms, make CD an efficient agent for basic cell biology, embryology, and clinical diagnosis [104].

Lysosomes, as another subcellular organelle, also play critical roles in protein degradation, cell signal transduction, plasma membrane repair, homeostasis, and autophagy, making the development of a specific probe for the imaging of lysosomes extremely necessary to understand the dysfunction of lysosomes that is related to various diseases, such as Alzheimer’s disease, neurodegenerative diseases, and cancer. Through the conjugation of the morpholine group (ML) as lysosome targeting to CDs formed from polyethyleneimine (PEI) and citric acid (CA) as precursors, CDs-PEI-ML were successfully fabricated to act as a long-term tracking probe of lysosomes for cell imaging with excellent properties that include strong blue Em, high photostability, adequate biocompatibility, and high selectivity toward lysosomes. Imaging of the lysosomal localization of CDs-PEI-ML in live Hela cells was described that CDs-PEI-ML were translocated into lysosomes via an endocytic pathway, and accumulated in acidic lysosomes with less diffusion into the cytoplasm due to the presence of lysosome target group morpholine on the surface of CDs-PEI-ML. This CDs-PEI-ML exhibited high specificity in lysosomal imaging, presenting an alternative FL probe for lysosome labeling and imaging (Figure 2(c)) [70].

Mitochondrion as a vital energy-supplying organelle, plays an important role in cellular functions, such as the generation of ATP and reactive oxygen species (ROS), regulation of transmembrane potentials, and initiation of apoptosis and autophagy, making the dysfunction of the mitochondrial responsible for various diseases, such as Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, diabetes, and cancer. The green FL CDs synthesized using chitosan, ethylenediamine, and mercaptosuccinic acid as precursors, showed intrinsic mitochondrial targeting ability to visualize mitochondria for bioimaging. These CDs quickly entered cells and specifically targeted mitochondria through energy-dependent, caveolae-mediated endocytosis, exhibiting superior features that included multicolor fluorescence, good photostability, and long-term imaging capability for at least 24 h, compared to MitoTrackers (commercial mitochondrial probes), representing a good FL nanoprobe for mitochondrial imaging that could be an alternative to commercial probes (Figure 2(d)) [63].

As another targeting species in cellular bioimaging, hyaluronan (HA), a linear long-chain polymer, is intimately associated with human tumor progression by stimulating growth, survival, and angiogenesis within primary tumors or their metastases. About 3.2 nm N-doped CDs using starch as a carbon source and L-tryptophan as nitrogen dopants were coupled with molecularly imprinted polymer (MIP) and glucuronic acid (GlcA) as an epitope of hyaluronan to form CD-MIPGlcA that was employed to probe HA cancer biomarkers. CD-MIPGlcA with (3–10) nm diameter emitted the green maximum Em at 500 nm under 445 nm Ex with high selectivity to HA, showing about 4 times higher FL intensity on HeLa cells than that on HaCaT cells, suggesting the ability of CD-MIPGlcA to differentiate between cancer cells and normal cells. The possibility of CD-MIPGlcA in HA-targeting FL nanoprobes indicates how powerful these tools are for the imaging of tumor biomarkers [71].

A desirable goal in bioimaging applications is to discriminate against interference from autofluorescence. However, it is still a challenge to develop room temperature (RT) phosphorescence (RTP) probes that feature ultralong Em lifetimes. CD-based silica composites (CDs@SiO2) with long Em lifetimes of 1.64 s were successfully fabricated for ultralong lifetime phosphorescence imaging of cells and tissue at RT using polyacrylic acid and EDA as CD precursors. CDs@SiO2 emitted blue fluorescence and the afterglow green Em maximum at 520 nm under an Ex of 356 nm. Although due to strong endogenous autofluorescence at 365 nm irradiation, it was difficult to distinguish between CDs@SiO2-untreated and treated onion bulb epidermal tissues, strong green phosphorescence of the CDs@SiO2-treated group in EM-6 mouse breast carcinoma cells and onion bulb epidermal tissue was observed after turning off the irradiation, highlighting the successful phosphorescence imaging of CDs@SiO2 in bioimaging in cells or plant and animal tissues by eliminating the autofluorescence interference. These CDs@SiO2 could serve as excellent nanoprobes for bioimaging with an efficient ability to discriminate against tissue autofluorescence, suggesting the potential for ultralong-lived RTP reporters [64]. In addition, a CD-grafted cellulose hybrid phosphor with a high affinity to bind cellulose was prepared for effective fluorescence mapping of cellulosic plant cell walls. These reddish-orange emissive CDs exhibited strong fluorescence at 633 nm with a 44% high quantum yield and high photostability. Various model plant tissues, including onion bulb epidermal tissue, the root of mung bean sprout, and the stem and leaf of Arabidopsis thaliana, were employed to demonstrate the bioimaging capacity of these CDs. CDs can readily have absorbed in plant tissues and bind to a celluose-rich structure with deep penetration to 55.5 μm depth in the stem of Arabidopsis thaliana, 177.2 μm in the root of mung bean sprout, and 136.3 μm in onion bulb epidermal tissue, respectively, which could address the limitation of FL dyes in their difficulty in visualizing deeper tissue layers of ≥ (50 to 100) μm. These CDs could serve as useful probes for the study of cell wall structure in living plant cells (Figure 2(e)) [81].

Undoubtedly, CDs exhibit excellent performance for bioimaging applications that can enhance the understanding of cells or tissues. CDs can also be applied as nanoprobes for the recognition of cancerous cells from normal cells. However, each specific mechanism of interaction between CDs and targets in cells or tissues, cytotoxicity, and optimal conditions of bioimaging processes should be carefully studied to contribute significantly to biological and biomedical sciences.

3.2. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging of Bacteria. Bacteria are abundant in the natural world and can lead to global bacterial infection, so it is essential to accurately specify them for efficient treatment. Nitrogen and sulfur
codoped CDs (NSCDs) were obtained by a microwave-assisted hydrothermal method using thiourea as a precursor in tris-acetate-ethylenediamine (TAE) buffer, for use in the imaging of various bacteria. These NSCDs were well monodispersed with an average size of 3.62 nm and exhibited maximum fluorescence at 426 nm Em under irradiation of 340 nm with a quantum yield of 57%. With no toxicity to bacteria cells, NSCDs internalization or endocytosis occurred after incubation with bacteria, and emitted blue fluorescence that was observed in E. coli, Pseudomonas, and Staphylococcus, but not in Klebsiella. The untagging effect on Klebsiella may have resulted in the decimation or disorientation of NSCDs due to the catalytic behavior of Klebsiella for different aromatic compounds. Additionally, the multicolor fluorescence of NSCDs as imaging nanoprobes was screened under different Ex wavelengths of (380, 450, and 505) nm in tagged E. coli cells, showing the bright colors of blue, green, and red at (430, 525, and 590) nm Ems, respectively [20].

Taking advantage of the selective binding affinity of boronic acid to diols groups on the bacterial cell wall, phenylboronic acid-functionalized FL carbon dots (FCDs) with strong blue fluorescence were synthesized and conjugated to dye molecules, then successfully applied in the selective detection of bacteria via the imaging of diol-containing bacteria. Owing to the preferential affinity of phenylboronic acid toward diol-containing molecules through cyclic ester bond formation, glucose-containing bacteria were replaced with dye molecules that led to the release of dye from the FCD to recover the fluorescence, gradually increasing the FL intensity from (0 to 60) min under 405 nm Ex in the presence of E. coli or S. aureus. These FCDs exhibited high sensitivity and chemical specificity for bacteria detection via fluorescence imaging (Figure 2(f)) [15].

Accurate bacterial identification is required to characterize unknown bacteria, which is important for the fast diagnosis of bacterial infections. A one-pot solvothermal approach was exploited to obtain a quaternized CDs using glycerol and dimethyloladecyl[3-(trimethoxysilyl)propyl] ammonium chloride (Si-QAC) for the identification of gram-type bacteria through bacteria imaging. Si-QAC containing CDs interacted with the negatively charged bacterial cells via both electrostatic and hydrophobic interactions, selectively connecting with the gram-positive bacteria due to the different surfaces of gram-positive and gram-negative bacteria. CDs displayed Ex-dependent fluorescence from (320 to 500) nm with maximum intensity at 473 nm under 360 nm Ex, significantly enhancing the blue fluorescence once the CDs are adsorbed onto the S. aureus gram-positive bacteria, but not the E. coli cells, in the mixture of these bacteria. This CD-based Gram-type differentiation method was accurate, fast, and facile, suggesting that this CD FL staining method could act as an alternative to the conventional gram staining method for differentiating gram-type bacteria (Figure 2(g)) [14].

CD-based bioimaging of bacteria is successfully utilized for FL imaging or differentiating gram-type bacteria. Nevertheless, these studies mostly focused on the imaging of several bacteria, such as S. aureus, and E. coli, other bacterial types that possess different influences should be further investigated. A CD with specific affinity towards each bacterium should be developed for efficient application. Cytotoxicity of CDs should be considered carefully for various types of bacteria for further utilization. The interference of culture media to FL of CDs and the real-time ability of monitoring bacteria are required to study deliberately.

3.3. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging of Fungi

Along with bacteria, the bioimaging of fungi is also important to understand the fungal biology or their infection mechanisms more clearly. Carbon dots synthesized from methyl red (MR) as a precursor in the presence of ethylenediamine (EDA) by facile hydrothermal pyrolysis, namely as MR-EDA-CDs, were fractionated into four fractions with different sizes of (16.3, 12.6, 5.5, and 4.5) nm under column chromatography that emitted green, purple, blue, and yellow fluorescence at (398, 470, 511, and 530) nm, respectively. These biocompatible MR-EDA-CDs were investigated as imaging nanoprobes for the FL imaging of pathogenic fungal cells (C. gloeosporioides). MR-EDA-CDs internalized into the fungal cells upon 6h of incubation at RT, brightly illuminating the multicolor fluorescence with Ex at 405 nm by confocal microscopy (Figure 2(h)) [99].

Owing to their ease of availability and affordability, natural resources have been widely used as precursors for the preparation of CDs. Acacia concinna fruit seeds (shikakai) as a green precursor were used to fabricate CDs in the application as biocompatible nanoprobes for the multicolor imaging of fungal (Penicillium sp.) cells. Upon Ex of 390 nm, these CDs displayed a strong Em peak at 468 nm with a higher quantum yield (10.2%), with good biocompatibility with fungal cells. The ultra-small CDs (2.5 nm diameter) internalized into the cells via endocytosis, and located in the cytoplasm and especially the nucleus of cells, exhibiting bright blue, green, and red fluorescence colors under laser Ex wavelengths of (405, 488, and 561) nm [100]. Another multicolor emissive CD that generated blue, green, and yellow fluorescence was obtained from Manilkara zapota fruits in acidic solutions (sulphuric acid and phosphoric acids) at different temperatures of 100 and 80 °C for 60–15 min. These CDs exhibited the maximum Em peaks at 443, 515, and 563 nm (blue, green, and yellow) under excitation at 350, 420, and 440 nm, with the QYs of 5.7, 7.9, and 5.2 %, respectively. Due to the small size of these CDs of from 1.9–4.5 nm, they are easily internalized into Aspergillus aculeatus and Fomitopsis sp. cells via the cell membrane through endocytosis, located in the cell membrane and cytoplasm, resulting in blue, green, and yellow fluorescence at Ex wavelengths of 405, 488, and 561 nm with good intensity [101]. Overall, the FL CDs have proven to be potential agents for the multicolor imaging applications of fungal cells. However, there are many other types of fungi that are essential to be explored as well. These reported CDs are mainly for imaging of the whole bodies of fungi. Specific CDs for different organelles in fungi are thus highly required to develop for obvious understanding.
3.4. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging of Animal Models. In vivo molecular imaging as a powerful tool for the analysis of the body significantly contributes to precise medicine through diagnosis and guiding therapy. N-doped carbon dots (NCDs) obtained by a hydrothermal method using pDA as precursor have embedded with Mn2+ onto the polydopamine (PDA) nanoparticle (NP) to fabricate the imaging nanoprobe, namely as PDA@NCDs(Mn). Using NCDs as FL agents, PDA as a photothermal agent, and Mn2+ as a T2 magnetic resonance contrast agent, these CD-based NPs were successfully applied as multimodal imaging nanoprobes for tumor diagnosis. These PDA@NCDs(Mn) NPs displayed maximum Em peak at 620 nm when Ex at 550, with strong red Em under the Ex wavelength of 500 nm. For in vivo fluorescence imaging investigation, PDA@NCDs(Mn) were injected into the left rear flank region of the mouse model, then accumulated in the tumor site with good distribution, hence valid fluorescence was observed around the tumor. After 12 h post-injection, organs (heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidney) and tumors were harvested to assess fluorescence intensities. These PDA@NCDs(Mn) NPs mainly accumulated in the liver, lung, and kidney tissues, as well as stronger fluorescence signal in tumor tissues than the spleen and heart, which was observed in a time-dependent fluorescence intensity manner, indicating red-emissive PDA@NCDs(Mn) NPs as promising fluorescence imaging agent for in vivo imaging (Figure 3(a)) [107]. Phosphonated compounds are widely applied for the imaging and treatment of severe bone turnover due to their high affinity to hydroxyapatite (HA) minerals. monophosphonated CDs obtained by a one-pot hydrothermal method using food-grade agave nectar and α-methoxy-ω-phosphate polyethylene glycol exhibited Ex-dependent Em spectra with maximum Ex/Em at 430/600 nm and high affinity towards calcium salt of the bone, indicating their potential as bone-seeking luminescent nanoprobes for the detection of bone microcracks via fluorescence imaging. The CDs-injected mice displayed a prominent difference in the luminescent emitted from the tibia when excited at 430 nm and imaged at 600 nm, suggesting that CDs can light up the tissue surrounding the bone. A statistically significant enhancement was detected in the treated mice, compared to the nontreated animal, by calculating the photon count after injection and the circulation time of about 30 min, indicating the feasibility of tissue imaging and sufficient signal sensitivity of these CDs nanoprobes as effective bone-seeking agent for the prediction of bone failure, considering the crack fracture mechanics (Figure 3(b)) [119].

Various metal ions doped into pDA during the hydrothermal treatment lead to the formation of FL CDs with Em wavelengths of up to 700 nm. The Ni-pDA-CDs were prepared using pDA and nickel ions (Ni2+) as raw materials that exhibited Ex-independent Em (at ~605 nm) with good photostability. A549 live cells treated with Ni-pDA-CDs for 30 min emitted strong red fluorescence under laser Ex at 552 nm in nucleoli, indicating the nucleolus targeting mechanism of Ni-pDA-CDs. Further, the in vivo imaging performance of Ni-pDA-CDs in tumor-bearing mice and zebrafish was investigated. The tumor region emitted bright red fluorescence after the intratumoral injection of Ni-pDA-CDs with a high signal-to-noise ratio of the tumor fluorescence. These Ni-pDA-CDs mainly accumulated in the tumor, with negligible distribution in other organs (heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidneys), suggesting their good biosafety. Additionally, the Ni-pDA-CDs-incubated zebrafish for 30 min were well stained with bright red fluorescence, confirming that they could pass through the mucus layer and interact with the cells in zebrafish due to their ultrasmall size, positively charged surfaces, and amphiphilicity. These experiments suggest the potential of these Ni-pDA-CDs as excellent red-emissive FL nanoprobes for in vivo imaging in both mice and zebrafish models (Figure 3(c)) [108].

The above studies show that these FL CDs hold great promise in the bioimaging of animal models that can support efficient diagnosis and treatment in medicinal applications. Nevertheless, it is worth developing the FL CDs that exhibit excellent biocompatibility and efficient ability of clearance, providing excellent FL probes for tracking tumors, delivering drugs, monitoring the ongoing disease, and further biomedical applications. Surface modification of CDs is needed to study for the elimination of nonspecific absorption onto CDs, and specific imaging of targets in vivo should be considered carefully when developing CDs.

4. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for Bioimaging-Supported Sensing Applications

Table 2 summarizes various CD-based imaging-supported sensing applications towards different targets such as metal ions, biomolecules, pH, temperature, and polarity. Case studies of their sensing performance are then described in this section based on their target.

4.1. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging-Supported Sensing of Metal Ions. It is worth noting that effective probes with excellent biocompatibility and photostability that can sensitively detect metal ions in living cells and in vivo remain a highly essential and challenging goal. Diverse CDs have been developed for the sensing applications of various ions, such as Fe3+, Ag+, Cu2+, and Hg2+. Fluorine (F)-doped CDs were successfully synthesized by a solvothermal process using difluoro-1,2-benzenediamine as the F source, and tartaric acid to improve aqueous solubility, for the intracellular detection of Ag+ in HEK 293 normal cell and B16F10 cancer cell, which was confirmed by the quenching FL image in the presence of Ag+ (Figure 4(a)) [162].

An on/off/on FL CD-based nanosensor was successfully fabricated for in vitro and in/ex vivo Fe3+ detection. CDs prepared by a solvothermal treatment of glycerol and a silane molecule (N-[3-(trimethoxysilyl)propyl]ethylenediamine
(DAMO) exhibited favorable biocompatibility and excellent fluorescence properties that included high QY blue fluorescence 45% at optimal Ex/Em of 350/442 nm, robust photostability in a wide range of ionic strengths and pH, selectively monitoring Fe^{3+} in Hela cells for 30 min and zebrafish for 2 h in the range 0–100 μM. Herein, FL imaging of Hela cells and zebrafish after treatment with Fe^{3+} was obtained and FL intensity measured, showing the gradual...

Figure 3: In/Ex vivo FL imaging of animals using CDs. (a) Real-time in vivo red FL images in nude mice at different time periods after (A) subcutaneous, and (B) intravenous injections of CDs via the tail vein revealed the accumulation of CDs in the tumor tissue. Adapted with permission from Ref. [107]. (b) In vivo FL of monophosphonated CDs in the tibia of (A) non-treated mice, (B) treated mice (Ex/Em = 430/600 nm); (C) treated the animal with the computed tomography-fused fluorescence image (Ex/Em = 465/700 nm), showing the feasibility of CDs for the detection of bone microcracks. (D) Significant difference of FL radiance between CDs-nontreated and CDs-treated mice (**p value < 0.05). Adapted with permission from Ref. [119]. (c) (A) In vivo FL images, and (B) corresponding FL intensity of the tumors before and after the intratumoral injection of CDs for different time periods, (C) Ex vivo FL images, and (D) corresponding FL intensity of different organs of mice after CDs injection for different day periods (** p value < 0.01, *** p value < 0.001). (D) CLSM image, and (E) bright-field image of CDs-stained zebrafish. Adapted with permission from Ref. [108].
| Precursors/forms | FL color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application | Biotarget | Ref. |
|-----------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----|
| Ascorbic acid, L-arginine | Green | 750/380–495, 750/500–650 | Two-photon CLSM | Imaging of tissues | Pigskin tissue | [120] |
| Red | | | | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | Fibroblast skin cells | |
| Abelmoschus manihot | Blue | 330/410 | FM | Sensing of Fe³⁺, 2,4,6-trinitrophenol (TNT) | Hela | [121] |
| Casein | Blue | 383/446 | CLSM | Sensing of Hg²⁺, biothiols | HeLa | [122] |
| Catechol, triethylene tetramine | Green | 415/515 | CLSM | Sensing of Fe³⁺, ascorbic acid (AA) | SMMC-7721 | [123] |
| p-phenylenediamine, ammonia | Green | 361/515 | CLSM | Sensing of CrVI, TNT, and AA | | |
| p-aminosalicylic acid, ethylene glycol dimethacrylate | Green | 390/520 | FM | Sensing of Fe³⁺, 2,4,6-trinitrophenol (TNT) | BT74 | [125] |
| Glycerol, DAMO | Blue | 350/442 | CLSM | Cancer/normal cell differentiation | Zebrafish, Hela, A549, Hep G2/ AT II, L02 | [126] |
| Glutaraldehyde | Blue | 440/– | CLSM | Sensing of Coenzymes A | | |
| Nitro benzaldehyde | Blue | 360/– | CLSM | Sensing of Ca²⁺, PEI | HeLa | [129] |
| Benzaldehyde | Blue | 350/450 | CLSM | Sensing of H₂O₂ | HeLa | [129] |
| CDs-chitosan | Blue | 360/425 | CLSM | Sensing of Fe³⁺, glutathione (GSH) | BHK | [130] |
| White pepper, H2N-PEG-NH2 | Green | 420/525–550 | CLSM | Sensing of cytochrome c | E. coli, S. aureus | [131] |
| CA, PEI | Red | 420/560 | CLSM | Sensing of H₂O₂ | HeLa | [129] |
| CQD-AuNC | Blue | 350/450 | CLSM | Sensing of Hg²⁺, glutathione (GSH) | BHK | [130] |
| CA, melamine | Blue | 360/440 | CLSM | Sensing of atrazine | E. coli, S. aureus | [131] |
| α-phenylenediamine | Green | 488/– | CLSM | Sensing of NAD⁺, tetracyclines | A375 cells | [132] |
| 2,3-diaminophenazine | Green | 495/530 | CLSM | Sensing of cell differentiation | CA125 | [134] |
| Fungus fibers | Blue | 360/440 | FM | Sensing of microRNA-21 | | |
| CA, EDA | Blue | 345/453 | CLSM | Sensing of cancer cells | OVCAR-3 | [134] |
| CD-aptamer | Blue | 355/425 | FM | Sensing of testosterone | | |
| CA, L-cysteine | Blue | 345/453 | CLSM | Sensing of cancer cells | OVCAR-3 | [134] |
| β-CD-Cds | Blue | 355/425 | FM | Sensing of testosterone | 293T | [135] |
| L-tartaric acid, triethylenetetramine | Blue | 350/425 | CLSM | Sensing of metronidazole | MCF-7 | [136] |
| CA | Blue | 380/450 | FM | Sensing of cathepsin B | HeLa | [137] |
| AS1411-Ce6-CQDs | Yellow–green | 450/520 | CLSM | Sensing of selenol | L929 | [138] |
| m-aminophenol | | | | | | |
| CD-DNS | | | | | | |
| Food grade agave nectar, α-methoxy-ω-phosphate PEG | Red | 430/600 | In vivo imaging system | Imaging of hydroxyapatite-targeted bone | Athymic nude mice | [119] |
| CA, EDA | Blue, yellow | 360/440, 565 | CLSM | Sensing of thioredoxin reductase | MCF-7, HeLa cells | [139] |
| Biotin-CD-Naph | Blue | 360/440 | CLSM | Sensing of superoxide anion | | |
| Neutral red, triethylamine | Yellow | 478/532, 618 | CLSM | Sensing of Ag⁺, GSH | SMMC7721 | [140] |
| Chestnut, onion | Blue | 370/440 | CLSM | Sensing of cytochrome c | T24 | [141] |
| Aconitic acid, tryptophan | Blue | 370/455 | CLSM | Sensing of superoxide anion | HepG-2, zebrafish | [142] |
| FO-Pte, FO-PSe | Green | 800/400–600 | Two-photon CLSM | Sensing of superoxide anion | Hela, A549 | [143] |
| Precursors/forms | Fl. color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application | Biotarget | Ref. |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| EDTA-2Na, CuCl2 | Blue      | 370/480            | CLSM        | Sensing of H₂S | Breast tumor tissue | H3122 [144] |
| CA              | Blue      | 405/470            | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺, AA | HepG2, zebrafish, liver ischemia tissue | [145] |
| CDs-DB          | Red       | 405/450–550        | CLSM        | Sensing of nitrite | A549 | [146] |
| CA, phenosafranine, | Orange  | 525/600            | CLSM        | Sensing of SKBR3 exosomes | HeLa | [147] |
| HAuCl₄, GSH, and glucose | Green  | 405/495–575       | FM          | Sensing of nitrite | A549 | [146] |
| PEI-GCDs-Ab     |           |                    |             |              |           |      |
| CA, 2,3-Phenazinediamine | Yellow | 380/568            | FM          | Sensing of Ag⁺, GSH | H1299 [148] |
| CA, urea, and triethylenetetramine | Blue     | 380/470            | CLSM        | Sensing of Cu²⁺, GSH | Yeast | [116] |
| CA, methionine  | Blue      | 350/420            | FM          | Sensing of Al³⁺ | HUVEC | [149] |
| Dunaliella salina | Green    | 340/415            | FM          | Imaging of cells | HEK-293 | [150] |
| Alkali lignin, EDA, and formaldehyde | Blue     | 405/488/-         | CLSM        | Sensing of Hg²⁺, Cr⁶⁺ | RAW264.7 | [151] |
| Ocimum sanctum  | Blue      | 330–385/-         | FM          | Imaging of cells | MDA-MB 468 | [152] |
| Banana plant    | Blue      | 408/-              | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | Hela, MCF-7 | [153] |
| Ganoderma lucidum spores | Blue     | 405/-              | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | MIHA | [154] |
| Phthalic acid, EDA, and H₃PO₄ | Blue     | 405/422/-         | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | SMMC-7721 | [155] |
| Phthalocyanine  | Green     | 780/520            | Two-photon CLSM | Imaging of cells | MCF-7 | [118] |
| Magnolia liliiflora | Blue       | 405/-              | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | Clone 9 hepatocytes | [156] |
| Sweet potato    | Blue      | 330–388/-         | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | Hela, HepG2 | [157] |
| Glucose, octadecylamine, and octadecene | Green    | 425/485            | CLSM        | Sensing of Cu²⁺ | HepG2, HL-7702 | [158] |
| HCD-based micelle | Red       | 425/655            | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | MCF-7 | [159] |
| Syringa obtata Lindl | Blue     | 340/425            | CLSM        | Sensing of Fe³⁺ | MCF-7 | [159] |
| Black soya beans | Blue      | 405/-              | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | SMMC-7721 | [160] |
| Aspartame       | Blue      | 420–480            | CLSM        | Imaging of cells | SGC-7901 | [161] |
decrease of intensity with increasing concentration of exogenous Fe\(^{3+}\). These CDs could semiquantitatively detect Fe\(^{3+}\) in vitro and in vivo. The feasibility of these CDs for the detection of Fe\(^{3+}\) in vivo was further evaluated through the tumor-specific imaging of nude mice bearing subcutaneous U14 xenograft tumors. Normal and tumor regions of a mouse model were imaged under in vivo animal imaging systems after 1 h postinjection of CDs/Fe\(^{3+}\) dots. The fluorescence intensity of the tumor region was stronger than that of normal tissue, which was verified by ex vivo tissue imaging, suggesting their possibility of realizing tumor-site imaging (Figure 4(b)) [126].

Amphiphilic FL carbon dots (A-CDs) were synthesized by cetyltrimethyl ammonium bromide (CTAB) modification of CDs that were prepared from CA and methionine. The fluorescence of these A-CDs was quenched by morin through electrostatic interaction between abundant amino groups of A-CDs and phenolic hydroxyl groups of morin, and then recovered in the presence of Al\(^{3+}\) by the release of A-CDs due to the strong complex of Al\(^{3+}\) and morin. These phenomena were used to detect Al\(^{3+}\) ions in HUVEC cells via cell imaging, showing fluorescence color that changed from light to deep green with increasing concentrations of Al\(^{3+}\) ions from 5–20 μM [149]. Green synthesis from Dunaliella Salina was

| Precursors/forms | FL color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic | Application | Biotarget | Ref. |
|-----------------|---------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| o-phenylenediamine, 4,5-difluoro-1,2-benzenediamine, and tartaric acid | Green | 405/500–560 | FM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | HEK 293T, NIH 3T3, COS-7, HepG2, and B16F10 | [162] |
| | Red | 555/600–700 | | | | |
| Aminosalicylic acid | Green | 405/600 | FM | Sensing of Ag\(^{+}\) | MiaPaCa-2 | [164] |
| | Yellow | 488/542 | CLSM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | | |
| | Red | | | | | |
| | Blue | 405/450 | FM | Imaging of cells | | |
| | | | | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | | |
| | | | | Imaging of fungi | | |
| | | | | C. gloeosporioides | | |
| CA, thiourea | Blue | 360/459 | CLSM | Imaging of cells | A549, KB | [166] |
| | Yellow | | | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | | |
| | Red | | | Imaging of fungi | | |
| L-glutamic acid, EDA | Blue | 440/510 | CLSM | Imaging of cells | A549, KB | [166] |
| | | | | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | | |
| m-phenylenediamine, diethylenetriaminepenta (methylene phosphonic acid) | Green | 440/510 | CLSM | Imaging of cells | A549, KB | [166] |
| | | | | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | | |
| | | | | Sensing of Co\(^{2+}\) | | |
| | | | | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\), AA | | |
| | | | | HeLa | | |
| | | | | A549 | | |
| | | | | HeLa | | |
| | | | | HeLa | | |
| CA, diethylenetriamine | Blue | 391/438 | FM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | HeLa | [167] |
| | Blue | 340/410 | FM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | A549 | [168] |
| Osmanthus fragrans | Green | 420/510 | FM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | HeLa | [169] |
| CA, methylamine hydrochloride, and lanthanum chloride heptahydrate | Blue | 330–385/ | FM | Sensing of Fe\(^{3+}\) | HeLa, zebrafish | [170] |
| | Green | 400–440/ | | | | |
| | Red | 510–550/ | | | | |
| P-phenylenediamine | Orange | 566/590 | CLSM | Sensing of intracellular pH | SMMC7721 | [171] |
| | | | | Sensing of intracellular pH | | |
| | | | | Pholiota adipose fungi | | |
| CA, 1,4-butanediamine | Blue | 380/443 | CLSM | Sensing of intracellular pH | Pholiota adipose fungi | [172] |
| RhB-AB-CDs | Red | 400/580 | CLSM | Sensing of intracellular polarity | HepG2, HL-7702 | [173] |
| | Red | 488/550–650 | | | | |
| p-phenylenediamine | Red | 405/415–550 | CLSM | Sensing of nucleolus | 293T | [174] |
| | | | | Sensing of temperature | | |
| Ascorbic acid | Yellow | | | | | |

Table 2: Continued.
used to obtain strong blue FL CDs with a maximum Ex/Em at 340/415 nm at a QY of 8% for the utilization of CDs as an FL turn-off sensor for Hg\textsuperscript{2+} and Cr\textsuperscript{6+} ions in living cells. These CDs exhibited good biocompatibility, high photostability, and negligible photobleaching, making them suitable for in vitro cell imaging. Upon treatment of exogenous Hg\textsuperscript{2+} and Cr\textsuperscript{6+} at 100 μM, the fluorescence of HEK-293 cells was strongly quenched in the red and green channels, indicating their possibility of detecting endogenous Hg\textsuperscript{2+} and Cr\textsuperscript{6+} contaminated live cells [150].

These results indicate that CDs-based bioimaging-supported sensing platforms for metal ions have been successfully developed in vitro and in vivo. However, it is required to carefully study the specificity of these CDs in sensing ions using FL imaging. Autofluorescence is considered the major issue for bioimaging of cells and tissue. Therefore, it is necessary to develop FL CDs that will not be affected by the cell and tissue autofluorescence, leading to a better possibility to recognize the targets. These reported studies are qualitative analysis for metal ions through

Figure 4: Fluorescence imaging-supported sensing of various metal ions and biomolecules. (a) Intracellular silver ions detection in HEK 293T cells and B16F10 cells without (-), and with (+) Ag\textsuperscript{+}, through obvious quenching phenomenon. Adapted with permission from Ref. [162]. (b) In vivo semiquantitative detection of Fe\textsuperscript{3+} through CLSM images of zebrafish treated with CDs and quenching FL effect after treatment with different concentrations of Fe\textsuperscript{3+} and corresponding FL intensity. Adapted with permission from Ref. [126]. (c) Action mechanism of AS1411–CQDs–Ce6 nanoprobe for the intracellular detection of endogenous CTSB through specific binding of AS1411 aptamer with nucleolin. Adapted with permission from Ref. [137]. (d) Strong FL imaging of living HeLa cells under different treatments with AS1411–CQDs–Ce6 and no FL signal of nucleolin-deficient HEK293 cells under treatment with AS1411–CQDs–Ce6 indicated the feasibility of nanoprobe for the detection of CTSB. Adapted with permission from Ref. [137]. (e) In vivo detection of Cyt (c) in zebrafish. CLSM images of zebrafish (A) untreated NCDs, (B) incubated with NCDs for 30 min; and subsequent treatment with (C) Cyt (c), or (D) etoposide for 20 min showed a significant FL quenching effect of Cyt (c). Adapted with permission from Ref. [142]. (f) Selective detection of superoxide anion in mice through the FL enhancement of O\textsubscript{2}\textsuperscript{−} to CDs. FL imaging of O\textsubscript{2}\textsuperscript{−} levels in the tumor tissues (A)–(C) and normal tissue (D)–(F) after treatment with Te-CDs, FO-PTe, and Se-CDs-treated mice, respectively, acquired using 800 nm two-photon excitation. (G) Corresponding FL intensity revealed the significant increase of O\textsubscript{2}\textsuperscript{−} level between normal and tumor tissues. Adapted with permission from Ref. [143].
bioimaging, which is unable to explore the minimum detectable level of ions. Therefore, quantitative analysis is required to predict the possibility of prepared CDs for practical application.

4.2. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging-Supported Sensing of Biomolecules. Detection of the presence of small biomolecules that may be toxic or play a role in physiological processes is critical for various biomedical purposes. Aminerich CDs with blue fluorescence were synthesized from CA and PEI and were then covalently assembled with nucleolin-targeting recognition nucleic acid aptamer AS1411 and a CTSB-cleavable peptide substrate that tethered with near-infrared (NIR) fluorophore chlorin e6 (Ce6–Pep), forming the nanoprobe AS1411–Ce6–CDs for cancer targeting and the imaging of cathepsin B (CTSB, a biomarker for malignant tumors), in living cancer cells (Figure 4(c)). Blue fluorescence of CDs at 450 nm was strongly quenched upon the conjugation with Ce6 via efficient fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET); otherwise, NIR fluorescence enhancement of Ce6 at ~650 nm was observed. After being internalized into cancer cells via nucleolin-mediated endocytosis, the overexpressed CTSB in the lysosome could cleave Ce6–Pep from AS1411–Ce6–CDs to terminate the FRET process, recovering the efficient ratiometric fluorescence response toward endogenous CTSB from NIR to blue Em. Compared to no fluorescence in nucleolin-deficient HEK293 cells, significant fluorescence was observed in nucleolin-positive Hela cancer cells, confirming that AS1411 aptamer could bind to nucleolin-positive cancer cells with high specificity. Thus, these CD-based nanoprobes could be particularly suitable for monitoring the low abundance of CTBS biomarkers via precise cell imaging (Figure 4(d)) [137].

Superoxide anion \( \left( \text{O}_2^- \right) \) is considered one of the primary reactive oxygen species (ROS) associated with major diseases. Se- and Te-containing CDs for the detection of \( \text{O}_2^- \) were successfully fabricated by the hydrothermal treatment of PO-PTe and FO-PSe as carbon sources, and their selectivity and sensitivity toward \( \text{O}_2^- \) was evaluated. These Se- and Te-containing CDs exhibited the optimal Ex/Em at 440/550 nm and 380/440 nm, respectively, showing enhanced fluorescence after the reaction with \( \text{O}_2^- \), and quenching when reacting with glutathione, making it possible to monitor the reversible and dynamic response of \( \text{O}_2^- \). The feasibility of these CDs for the analysis of \( \text{O}_2^- \) was investigated using two-photon fluorescence imagery of different cells (hepatocytes, HepG2 cells, macrophages, Hela cells, and lung cancer cells) and a mouse-bearing tumor model. Under 800 nm Ex, two-photon fluorescence Em of 400–500 nm for Te-CDs and 500–600 nm for Se-CDs were observed to be clearer in tumor cells than in normal cells, due to the high concentration of \( \text{O}_2^- \) in cancer cells, compared to normal cells. Additionally, brighter fluorescence with deep tissue penetration and reduced background fluorescence was obtained in the breast tumor tissue of mice compared to normal abdomen tissue due to the significantly higher level of \( \text{O}_2^- \) in tumor tissue. Te-containing CDs exhibited the highest sensitivity toward \( \text{O}_2^- \), suggesting that they could serve as nanoprobes for the real-time and dynamic imaging of \( \text{O}_2^- \) fluxes (Figure 4(f)) [143].

Gold-carbon quantum dots (GCDs) synthesized by the modification of CDs and gold nanoclusters through a microwave-assisted method immobilized the tumor-specific antibodies to serve as FL nanoprobes for the intracellular imaging of cancer-derived exosomes. HER2, a common surface marker found on SKBR3 exosomes, was used as a target protein for the detection of exosomes in Hela cells. After being taken up by cells, the anti-HER antibody conjugated nanoprobes stuck to SKBR3 exosomes and showed bright green fluorescence in the cytoplasm, indicating the excellent intracellular fluorescence image of exosomes [147].

Coenzyme A, an important coenzyme in many biochemical reactions of the human body, such as neurodegeneration, protein acetylation, autophagy, and signal transduction, might cause different types of damage due to the deficiency of CoA. Green synthesis was conducted under hydrothermal heating using two natural biomasses (water chestnut and onion) as precursors to obtain the S and N doped FL CDs (S, N/CDs) that were used to monitor the presence of coenzyme A in human bladder cancer T24 cells. These S, N/CDs possessed strong blue fluorescence with maximum Ex/Em at 370/475 nm that was dramatically quenched when bound to Cu\(^{2+}\) ions and then restored fluorescence in the presence of coenzyme A due to the stronger complex between thiol groups of coenzyme A and Cu\(^{2+}\). After the loading of S, N/CDs into T24 cells for 30 min, the stronger blue and green fluorescence was observed in the T24 cells excited at 405 and 488 nm in the presence of coenzyme A, indicating that S, N/CDs-Cu\(^{2+}\) probe penetrated cell membranes, and efficiently imaged intracellular Coenzyme A [141].

Fluorescence imaging with effective monitoring of cytochrome c as an important biomarker for the early stage of apoptosis in cell apoptosis was developed using N-doped CDs that were prepared by the hydrothermal treatment of aconitic acid and tryptophan. These CDs showed strong blue fluorescence with an intensity maximum at 455 nm under 370 nm Ex and QY at 20%, which is obviously quenched by cytochrome c, facilitating the in-situ detection of cytochrome c for apoptosis signaling. After treatment of HepG-2 cells with N-doped CDs for 2 h, the bright blue Em was gradually decreased with increasing concentrations of etoposide, which is an apoptosis inducer to specifically trigger the release of cytosolic cytochrome c from mitochondria, indicating the quantitative imaging of etoposide-induced intracellular release during cell apoptosis. The ability to detect cytochrome c was further investigated in zebrafish imaging where brighter blue fluorescence in the abdomen of 3-day old CDs-treated zebrafish was observed, as compared to that when the zebrafish were consequently treated with cytochrome c, suggesting N-doped CDs as effective FL nanoprobes for the monitoring of cytochrome c mediated cell apoptosis pathway (Figure 4(e)) [142].

Overall, there are several excellent CDs that have been used to detect biomolecules in vitro and in vivo via bioimaging. Again, autofluorescence of cells and tissue, and the
specificity of FL CDs must be carefully considered to enhance the sensing performance. Quantitative analysis should be studied for further practical application. The cytotoxicity of CDs is an urgent matter to investigate before the sensing process. The time and mechanism of CD penetration into the target should be clearly examined for further effective imaging-supported sensing application.

4.3. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for the Bioimaging-Supported Sensing of pH, Temperature, and Polarity. The direct measurement of some intracellular conditions in cells is essential but not easily achieved, making it difficult to explain their effects on bioreactions. The dual-Em CDs obtained by the hydrothermal pyrolysis of aniline blue (AB) and rhodamine B (RhB), and CDs made from CA and 1,4-butanediamine in the presence of PEG 400, denoted as RhB-AB-CDs, were exploited as intracellular pH nanoprobes in the mycelia of Pholiota adipose fungus. These RhB-AB-CDs emitted two distinct Em bands at the maximum Ex/Em of 380/443 nm and 400/580 nm, which were attributed to the Ex-dependent Em of CDs and the Ex-independent Em characteristic of RhB, respectively, making the signal sensitive to pH, corresponding to the ratio of Em intensity at 580 and 467 nm under Ex at 400 nm. They were then applied to monitor the intracellular pH of fungal mycelia using the ratio of FL intensity in the red/blue channels at 580/467 nm under continuous Ex at 405 nm, showing the increase of this ratio with an increase of pH value from pH 5.52 to 7.50 with good linear regression of 0.997, suggesting the highly photostable fluorescence of these CDs for the reliable long-term monitoring of intracellular pH (Figure 5(a)) [172].

Temperature is also an important factor in the life process, due to the role of thermal energy transfer in all biological reactions in organisms. Faint yellow fluorescence CDs were synthesized directly from ascorbic acid aqueous solution by an electrochemical method at RT and exhibited Ex-dependent Em with a maximum Ex at 400 nm. The fluorescence of these CDs with a high quantum yield at 35.2% was stable with different pH values, ionic strengths, and storage times, and sensitive to temperature, with the fluorescence intensity changing linearly with a temperature of 20–100 °C. Human normal HEK 293T cells emitted faint yellow fluorescence under 405 nm irradiation; moreover, as the temperature increased from 20 to 40 °C or decreased from 40 to 20 °C, the fluorescence intensity gradually decreased or increased, respectively. Furthermore, these CDs can especially stain the nucleolus by entering the cell nucleolus and adsorbing on nucleic acids (DNA and RNA). Thus, the CDs could act as an effective nanothermometer to monitor in vitro and in vivo temperature by utilizing the yellow-emissive nanoprobes of nucleolus specific imaging (Figure 5(b)) [174].

Monitoring the change of intracellular polarity plays a great role in the understanding of its functions in live cells, due to its large impact on the activity of biomolecules or the function of domains. The FL carbon dots R-CDs with a 5 nm spherical shape and good monodispersity were successfully obtained through a hydrothermal method at 200 °C for 12 h using p-phenylenediamine as a precursor, displaying significant red Em under 420 nm Ex, and were then utilized as FL nanoprobes for the real-time sensing of polarity in living cells. The R-CDs possessed a high quantum yield of 47.87%, high photostability, good biocompatibility up to 400 μg/mL, and dual targetability for mitochondria and lysosomes in cells. Various solutions with increasing polarity from 10 to 99 % were obtained by mixing water and dioxane based on volume ratios and showed a decrease in FL intensity of up to 11-fold. For colocalization examination of these R-CDs, human liver cancer HepG2 cells contained with R-CDs, Mito-tracker green, and Lyso-Tracker Red presented partial overlaps of the regions between the red FL of R-CDs and the Mito-tracker green or Lyso-Tracker Red areas, suggesting the preferential accumulation of R-CDs in mitochondria and lysosomes. The ability of R-CDs to monitor the polarity change in HepG2 cells by the reduction of red-emissive fluorescence with increasing polarity was successfully studied. Interestingly, the imaging of HepG2 cells and normal human liver HL-7702 cells both treated with R-CDs showed the difference between the strong red fluorescence in HepG2 cells and weak fluorescence in HL-7702 cells, discriminating the lower polarity in cancer cells with high polarity in normal cells. These R-CDs nanoprobes could contribute to mitochondrial and lysosomal polarity-related studies (Figure 5(c)) [173].

5. Fluorescent Carbon Dots for Bioimaging-Guided Therapeutic Application

Table 3 summarizes the imaging-guided therapeutic approaches using various CDs, including individual treatment (chemotherapy, photodynamic therapy, photothermal therapy) and combined treatment. Case studies of this CD-based imaging-guided therapy are then deliberated in this section based on their biotargets and performance. As fluorescence nanoprobes, CDs have been widely investigated to enhance fluorescence imaging-guided therapies for the better intervention of tumors. Using folic acid (FA) that shows high receptors in hepatoma cells and DOX as an anticancer drug, FA-CDs-DOX with a high fluorescence quantum yield (97%) was synthesized to enhance the antitumor activity and imaging efficiency for imaging-guided chemotherapy of targeted liver cancer. In vivo images of tumor-bearing mice after the injection of FA-CDs-DOX displayed strong orange-red fluorescence under Ex at 480 nm light, while no FL signal was observed in tumor-bearing mice treated with CDs or DOX only, indicating their ability to penetrate tumor tissue and skin to achieve FL imaging effects. This FA-CDs-DOX also exhibited significantly higher tumor inhibition in vivo through the targeting ability of FA-CDs-DOX compared to that of free DOX, suggesting the effective improvement of FL image-guided chemotherapeutic effect in liver cancer therapy (Figure 6(a)) [182].

Innovative nanomedicine for the theranostics of multidrug-resistant (MDR) tumors remains a challenge for scientists. Yellow FL CDs (y-CDs)/dendrimer nanohybrids have been developed as a platform for ultrasound-enhanced...
fluorescence imaging and chemotherapy of MDR tumors (Figure 6(b)). These nanoprobes were prepared via electrostatic interaction between γ-CDs and generation 5 (G5) poly(amidoamine) dendrimers and d-α-tocopheryl polyethylene glycol 1000 succinate (G5-TPGS), then physically loaded with anticancer drug doxorubicin (DOX) to form (G5-TPGS@γ-CDs)-DOX complexes with high drug loading efficiency of 40.7%. The tumor fluorescence imaging by these complexes with a strong Em peak at 550 nm was further evaluated in the presence and absence of ultrasound-targeted microbubble destruction (UTMD). Images of in vivo mice-bearing MCF-7/ADR xenografts after the intravenous injection of γ-CDs and (G5-TPGS@γ-CDs)-DOX complexes (with or without UTMD) displayed stronger fluorescence signals in the tumor region, even at 6 h postinjection, compared to weaker fluorescence in the γ-CDs control.
| Precursors/Forms                        | FL color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic Application          | Application                                      | Biotarget                      | Ref. |
|----------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------|
| Bamboo leaves CDs-CBBA-Dox             | Green    | 488/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                            | [86] |
| Hypocrella bambusae                    | Red      | 540/610           | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                            | [175]|
| CA, hyaluronic acid, and PEI CD@p-CBA-DOX | Blue     | 341/461           | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [176]|
| Dopamine hydrochloride, folic acid     | Blue     | 425/485           | FM                               | Imaging-guided PTT                               | MCF-7/ADR tumor-bearing mice    | [177]|
| 4-amino salicylic acid                 | Yellow   | 490/547           | FM                               | Imaging-guided PTT                               | MCF-7/ADR tumor-bearing mice    | [178]|
| CA, EDA, hyaluronic acid               | Blue     | 405/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | A549 tumor-bearing mice         | [179]|
| MSN-SS-CDHA-Dox                        | Green    | 488/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | Zebrafish                       | [180]|
| CA, Ru-Aphen                           | Red      | 561/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                            | [181]|
| 1,3,6-trinitropyrene                   | Green    | 457/570           | In vivo imaging system            | Imaging-guided PTT                               | 4T1-tumor-bearing mice          | [182]|
| CA, folic acid, DOX                    | Blue     | 405/488           | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | Zebrafish                       | [183]|
| L-cysteine, EDA, and Ru(II) complex    | Red      | 405/660           | Two-photon system                | Imaging of lysosome-targeted cells              | A549 tumor-bearing mice         | [184]|
| hydroxyapatite NPs                     | Green    | 455/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging-guided PTT                               | Zebrafish                       | [185]|
| C-hMOS-Dox                             | Red      | 523/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging-guided PTT                               | Tumor-bearing mice              | [186]|
| CA, HPAP                               | Blue     | 405/–             | In vivo imaging system            | Imaging-guided gene therapy                     | MCF-7 tumor-bearing BALB/c nude mice | [187]|
| PPD@HPAP-CDs/pDNA                      | Green    | 488/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging-guided gene therapy                     | A549                            | [188]|
| Sodium citrate, ammonium               | Blue     | 350/435           | FM                               | Imaging-guided chemotherapy                      |                                |      |
| Bicarbonate CDs/Dox/                   | Cyan     | 405/445           | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | HeLa                            | [189]|
| G5-RGD-TPGS                            | Green    | 440/477           | CLSM                             | Imaging-guided PTT                               | HeLa                            | [190]|
| 6-O-((O,O’-Di-lauryl)tartaryl)-       | Red      | 540/620           | In vivo imaging system            | Imaging-guided PTT                               | Hela tumor-bearing mice         | [191]|
| d-glucose, WS2@CDs                     | 4-aminophenol                      | 405/925                          | In vivo imaging system                    | NII FL imaging-guided PTT       | Hela tumor-bearing BALB/C mice | [192]|
| CSCNP-R-CQDs/Dox                       | Blue     | 360/–             | In vivo imaging system            | Imaging-guided PTT                               | U87                             | [193]|
| Watermelon juice                       | Yellow   | 808/925           | CLSM                             | Imaging of cells                                | Glioma-bearing mice             | [194]|
| F127-mPR, formalin, and phenol         | Yellow   | 488/–             | CLSM                             | Imaging-guided PTT                               |                                |      |
Significant enhancement of fluorescence was observed stably in the tumor region with the assistance of UTMD in vivo, as well as ex vivo, tumor and other organs, supporting the enhancing role of the UTMD-rendered sonoporation effect. On the other hand, multicolor highly crystalline carbon nanodots (HCCDs) were successfully fabricated for the use in dual-modal imaging-guided PTT of glioma. HCCDs exhibited optimal Ex/Em 440/506 nm with Ex-dependent full-color fluorescence, where the Em was tuned from blue to green through increasing the Ex wavelength. With high water dispersity and good biocompatibility, U87 glioma-bearing mice were treated with HCCDs for the investigation of imaging-guide PTT performance, displaying that intravenously administrated HCCDs gradually accumulated in the tumor, emitted the brightest imaging at 30 min post-injection under 465 nm Ex, and achieved the effective PTT effect under an 808 nm laser. The capacity of HCCDs to permeate the glioma and specifically accumulate in glioma cells could provide imaging-guided PTT targeted to glioma in mice, without side effects to the normal tissues (Figure 6(d)) [189].

The therapeutic approach of combination phototherapy, including photodynamic therapy (PDT) and photothermal therapy (PTT), has recently shown great promise for efficient cancer therapy by inducing reactive oxygen species (ROS) or heat into tumors to kill cancer cells. The yellow FL CDs with optimal Ex/Em 500/570 nm were easily obtained by the hydrothermal treatment of 1,3,6-trinitropyrene and possessed a strong ability to simultaneously generate singlet oxygen (1O2) (QY 5.7%), hydroxyl radical (OH·), and heat effect under a 635 nm laser irradiation (73.5% photothermal conversion efficiency). Interestingly, these CDs exhibited one-photon excited (OPE) and two-photon excited (TPE) fluorescence at a peak of 570 nm and displayed green fluorescence imaging in Hela cells under excitation by both 457 and 800 nm lasers, confirming the selective accumulation of CDs in lysosomes by the overlapping fluorescence of commercial lysosome targeting dye. With good biocompatibility, in vivo photoacoustic imaging and the photothermal performances of CDs on the 4T1-tumor-bearing nude mice were studied after the intravenous injection of CDs for 4 h, showing significant enhancement of the PA signal in the tumor region and an increase in temperature up to 70°C under an 800 nm laser, suggesting that these CDs could act as lysosome-targeting phototheranostic agents for

| Precursors/Forms                  | FL color | Applied Ex/Em (nm) | Microscopic          | Application                        | Biotarget                      | Ref. |
|-----------------------------------|----------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------|
| CA, PEI                           | Red      | 550/640            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | MCF-7, HeLa, and 4T1            | [190]|
| CD-Ce6                            |          |                    |                      |                                    | 4T1 tumor-bearing BALB/c mice   |      |
| CA, GdCl3, poly-lysine            | Blue     | 350/450            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | Hela tumor-bearing mice         | [191]|
| FA-GdN@CQDs-MWCNTs                |          |                    |                      |                                    |                                 |      |
| Manganese(II) phthalocyanine      | Red      | 690/745            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | Hela tumor-bearing mice         | [192]|
| Pheophytin powder                 | Red      | 620/680            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [193]|
| CA, formamide                     | Red      | 620/650            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [194]|
| HFn(DOX)/CDs                      |          |                    |                      |                                    | S180 tumor-bearing mice         |      |
| CA                                | Red      | 633/640/750        | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [195]|
| CyOH–AgNP/CD                      |          |                    |                      |                                    |                                 |      |
| Polythiophene                     | Red      | 635/690            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [196]|
| CDs/MnO2-PEG                      |          |                    |                      |                                    |                                 |      |
| Polythiophene, diphenyl diselenide| Red      | 500/730, 820       | Two-photon           | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [197]|
| CA, formamide                     | Red      | 620/650            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [194]|
| Polythiophene                     | Red      | 635/690            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [196]|
| Polythiophene, diphenyl diselenide| Red      | 500/730, 820       | Two-photon           | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [197]|
| CA, formamide                     | Red      | 620/650            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [194]|
| Polythiophene                     | Red      | 635/690            | CLSM                 | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [196]|
| Polythiophene, diphenyl diselenide| Red      | 500/730, 820       | Two-photon           | Imaging of cells                   | 4T1 tumor-bearing mice          | [197]|

Table 3: Continued.
Figure 6: Fluorescence imaging-guided therapy using CDs. (a) Schematic of FL imaging-guided therapeutics of liver cancer using FA-CDs-DOX. Adapted with permission from Ref. [182]. (b) Demonstration of ultrasound-enhanced theranostics of multidrug-resistant tumors using G5-TPGS@y-CDs)-DOX drug-loaded CD/dendrimer nanohybrids. Adapted with permission from Ref. [178]. (c) (A) Therapeutic schedule of (G5-TPGS@y-CDs)-DOX and ultrasound-targeted microbubble destruction (UTMD) treatment in vivo. (B) Tumor volumes, (C) body weights, and (D) survival rate of mice after intravenous injection periods of different groups (saline, free DOX, (G5-(m)PEG@y-CDs)-DOX, (G5-TPGS@y-CDs)-DOX, or (G5-TPGS@y-CDs)-DOX + UTMD) showed the effective chemotherapy of tumors. Adapted with permission from Ref. [178]. (d) In vivo FL images of glioma-bearing mice after intravenous injection of saline and HCCDs, and ex vivo images of major organs after administration under 465 nm excitation displayed the accumulation of HCCDs in the tumor region for the effective FL imaging-guided PPT of glioma. Adapted with permission from Ref. [189].
The magneto-fluorescent CDs prepared by the hydrothermal treatment of a mixture of polylysine, CA, and GdCl₃ were decorated on carbon nanotubes (CNTs)/doxorubicin (DOX) nanocomposites, then conjugated with FA to form FA-GdN@CDs-CNTs to serve as dual-modal fluorescence/magnetic resonance (MR) imaging. These CD-based complexes possess low toxicity, good biocompatibility, and drug release ability forced by pH and NIR light and are suitable for synergistic chemo-photothermal therapy (Chemo/PTT) in cancer excision. Fluorescence images of HeLa cells treated with FA-GdN@CDs-CNTs displayed green and red fluorescence under 488 and 543 nm illumination in cell membrane and cytoplasm, but not in nuclei, indicating that this complex could internalize in cell membranes, and enter HeLa cells via endocytosis. With the support of FL imaging, the combined chemo-PTT in HeLa tumor-bearing nude mice was effective in reducing the tumor with a great contribution to tumor inhibition, without damage to major organs [191]. Overall, owing to the high tumor-inhibition efficacy and low side effects, the capability of the CD imaging-guided therapeutic was proven as a smart approach for enhanced therapeutic effects, suggesting it offered an excellent strategy for potential clinical therapeutic application.

This section indicates that CDs exhibit the promising potential for FL imaging-guided therapy due to their unique properties. Compared to other CDs, the red-emissive CDs possess a more efficient capability to serve as theragnostic nanoagents in vivo. Surface modification of CDs is essential to precisely consider for reducing the non-specific protein absorption and improving the specifically tumor-targeted ability. The cytotoxicity and perfect ability of clearance must be attentively investigated for the best therapeutic efficacy without any side effects. It is becoming necessary to develop CDs with both high FL quantum yield and synergistic chemo/PDT/PTT, suggesting that CDs could be a promising theragnostic candidate for imaging-guided therapy.

6. Conclusions and Perspectives

Recently, fluorescent carbon dots have greatly accelerated the advancement of bioimaging-supported nanomedicine to supply efficient biomedical applications, including the efficacy of molecular imaging that increased the image properties over the conventional FL agents, accurate monitoring of the presence of ions and molecules via imaging for biological and medical studies, and efficient treatment of tumors via FL imaging guidance. As discussed above, various reports have successfully developed multicolor FL CDs with superior properties, such as high fluorescence, excellent photostability, ease of functionalization, and good biocompatibility, that have been utilized in multiple biomedical applications, from biology to medicine. Although the advancement of CD-supported imaging-based nanomedicine holds promising potential in further clinical medicine, some critical aspects require more attention before shifting to the clinical setting.

Even though the affordability of CDs was confirmed, their exploitation in imaging-supported nanomedicine is difficult to offer globally, due to the limitation that the large-scale synthesis methods of functional CDs have not been standardized. Because fluorescence is the main property of CDs for imaging-supported medicine, the high quantum yield of CDs must be obtained for the best performance of bioimaging. For example, the high quantum yield of CDs can be achieved by heteroatom doping [198]. Although research on the toxicity of CDs has confirmed their biocompatibility in vitro and in vivo, the long-term accumulation of CDs in targeted tissue or organs might cause irritation, inflammation, renal toxicity, hepatotoxicity, and immune system problems in organisms. They remain challenges for scientists to evaluate the possibility of CDs in vivo, and the release capacity of CDs out of the body, without side effects. Sufficient photostability of CDs must be ensured to analyze the stability of the FL signal for further in vivo applications.

In the field of bioimaging-supported sensing platforms for abnormal metal ions and molecules, almost all reports could only obtain qualitative detection or semiquantitative monitoring in the microgram range; hence, accurate quantitative detection should be acquired to provide significant information about biological processes or the diagnosis and prognosis of diseases. Specific organelle-targetable CDs possess the ability to image the selective targets, distinguish cancerous cells from normal cells, or detect further biomarkers in the targeted organelles. Thus, the selection of optimal CDs for specific imaging-supported applications is highly required for the improvement of sensing performance. Further, the high specificity of the bioimaging-supported sensing platforms should also be improved in the presence of various interferences in the organism’s body.

For FL imaging-guided therapy, the assurance of tumor-targeted specificity that will be increased through image resolution and performance is required for the tracking of tumors during the therapeutic process. This tumor specificity is attributed to the loading optimization of specific agents towards each tumor target, the stability of conjugated nanoparticles in the body, and the improvement of FL microscopic techniques through the enhancement of contrast-to-noise ratio. Overcoming the nonspecific uptake in nontargeted organs for the best treatment of tumors should be concentrated on. CDs that can generate FL signals from deeply located tissue should continue to be developed to enhance the visualization capacity of CDs in deep tumor tissue. In addition, the CDs with highly biodegradable ability must be considerably focused on to develop facile utilization in clinical medicine without side effects. Based on the ease of functionalization of CDs, combined therapeutic approaches, such as chemo/PDT/PTT, which can achieve more efficacious treatment, should be integrated. For fighting bacterial infections, CDs-integrated biofilms were successfully utilized for imaging and selectively eliminating bacteria, suggesting that the integration of CDs along with antibiotics in biofilms could exhibit better control of bacterial infections than alone [199]. Hence, CDs-integrated materials should be
intensively developed for their efficacy enhancement. Furthermore, technical professionals for accurate biomedicine are also important, so that medical scientists will have sufficient medicinal skills to perform the techniques and analyze the acquired data for thorough implementation.

In summary, the applications of CDs in FL imaging-based biomedicine appear to hold promising innovation for further clinical use. Although these CD-supported imaging-based biomedicines have been reported in the initial stages, their substantial potential will be achieved in clinical medicine if their possibility is successfully evaluated in clinical trials. The toxicology, pharmacokinetic, and applicable studies of these CD-based imaging-supported biomedicine concepts in the human body should be intensively researched. The development of advanced CDs for these emerging biomedicine concepts is being completed day-by-day, leading to the realization of real medical accomplishment in the near future. Due to the superior properties of CDs in the fields of imaging-based biomedicine, their enormous applications could be proficiently handled globally for the best medicinal intervention.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest with this study.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2020M3A9E4104385) and the Korea Environment Industry and Technology Institute (KEITI) through the “Technology Development Project for Biological Hazards Management in Indoor Air” Project, funded by the Korea Ministry of Environment (MOE) (G232021010381).

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