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► **To cite this version:**

Charles Dumontet, Mary Ann Jordan. Microtubule-binding agents: a dynamic field of cancer therapeutics.. *Nature Reviews Drug Discovery*, 2010, 9 (10), pp.790-803. 10.1038/nrd3253 . inserm-00526519

HAL Id: inserm-00526519

<https://inserm.hal.science/inserm-00526519v1>

Submitted on 4 Apr 2011

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Microtubule binding agents: a dynamic target for cancer therapeutics

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Acknowledgements:

This work was supported in part by the Association pour la Recherche contre le Cancer and the Ligue contre le Cancer

Conflicts of interest:

CD has received research funding from Pierre Fabre, Sanofi-Aventis and has worked as a consultant for Sanofi-Aventis and Bristol Myers Squibb

MAJ has received research support from Bristol Myers Squibb, Eisai Pharmaceuticals, and Immunogen

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2 **Preface**

4 Microtubules are dynamic filamentous cytoskeletal proteins that are an important therapeutic target
6 in tumor cells. Microtubule binding agents have been part of the pharmacopoeia of cancer for
8 decades, and until the advent of targeted therapy microtubules were the only alternative to DNA as a
10 therapeutic target in cancer. The screening of a variety of botanical species and marine organisms
has yielded promising new antitubulin agents with novel properties. Enhanced tumor specificity,
reduced neurotoxicity, and insensitivity to chemoresistance mechanisms are the three main
objectives in the current search for novel microtubule binding agents.

12 **Introduction**

14 Microtubules play several key roles that are important in cell proliferation, trafficking, signalling, and
16 migration in eukaryotic cells. For this reason several microtubule binding agents have been
developed with different aims, including as pesticides, antiparasitics and anticancer agents. In
mammalian cells microtubules are present both in interphase cells and in dividing cells. In the latter,
microtubules constituting the mitotic spindle are highly dynamic and exquisitely sensitive to
therapeutic inhibitors. This explains why compounds altering microtubule function have proven to be
highly active in patients with cancer. The vinca alkaloids, identified over 50 years ago ¹ and the
taxanes, first isolated almost 40 years ago ^{2,3} are currently administered in a large variety of
indications including solid tumors and haematological malignancies ⁴⁻⁶. They are most often
integrated in combination chemotherapy regimens, including in some curative regimens, for example
in patients with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Taxanes have become an essential component in the
adjuvant and advanced setting of patients with breast cancer and are also extensively used in
patients with ovarian cancer, non small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), and Kaposi's sarcoma^{7,8}.

26 A peculiarity of microtubule binding agents is their extreme structural diversity and, in many cases,
28 structural complexity (Figure 1). It should be stressed that many agents were isolated from marine
organisms or botanicals which are not cultivated, and in which they are present in minute amounts ⁹.
30 Many of the most active agents such as taxanes were difficult to develop in the clinic due to scarcity
of their natural sources (Pacific yew bark in the case of taxol), a problem which was in some cases
32 later solved by partial or total synthesis of the compounds of interest, although total synthesis has
not proven to be the best option for some compounds such as taxanes ¹⁰. This problem is still
34 prevalent today for many of the novel microtubule binding agents, explaining, at least in part, the
slow clinical development of many of the newer agents ¹¹⁻¹³.

36 In the age of small molecule targeted therapies and therapeutic monoclonal antibodies it is
38 noteworthy that extensive resources and scores of clinical trials are still being devoted to the
identification and evaluation of microtubule-targeted agents including taxanes, epothilones, vinca
40 alkaloids, halichondrins, maytansinoids, colchicine-site binding agents, and others. This is partly due
to the extremely large untapped reservoir of potential therapeutic natural compounds which
42 influence microtubule dynamics and also to our growing understanding of the role of the microtubule
cytoskeleton in cancer cells. After briefly reviewing mechanisms of action of and resistance to
44 anticancer microtubule binding agents, we will focus on novel agents, in particular those that have
recently been approved or reached the stage of clinical trials. An increasingly important issue is that
46 of toxicity, since many of these agents cause significant neurological toxicity.

48 **Mechanisms of action**

50 A large number of chemically diverse substances generally originating from natural sources bind to
52 tubulin and/or microtubules (Table 1), altering microtubule polymerization and dynamics in diverse
ways. A reasonable hypothesis is that plants and animals evolved this vast number of compounds

54 that mimic endogenous regulators of microtubule behavior in order to avoid predation. All of these
56 compounds are antimitotic agents that inhibit cell proliferation by binding to microtubules and
58 suppressing microtubule dynamics during the particularly vulnerable mitotic stage of the cell cycle
60 (Figure 2). To document the suppressive effects of these agents on microtubule dynamics, most
62 studies have used time-lapse microscopy to analyse interphase microtubules in live cells¹⁴. Spindle
64 microtubule dynamics are more difficult to analyse because of microtubule density but may be
66 indirectly evaluated by the study of centromere dynamics.^{15,16} These studies have confirmed that
68 inhibition of spindle and interphase microtubule dynamics occurred at the same concentrations as
70 those inducing mitotic arrest (Box 1).

62 ***Depolymerizing vs. stabilizing agents***

64 The microtubule-targeted antimitotic drugs are often classified into two major groups, the
66 microtubule-destabilizing agents and the microtubule-stabilizing agents, according to their effects at
68 high concentrations on microtubule polymer mass. The so-called “destabilizing” agents inhibit
70 microtubule polymerization when present at high concentrations. Most of these agents bind in one
72 of two domains on tubulin, the “vinca” domain and the “colchicine” domain (Table 1). Vinca site
74 binders include the vinca alkaloids (vinblastine, vincristine, vinorelbine, vindesine, and vinflunine),
76 the cryptophycins, the dolastatins, eribulin, spongistatin, rhizoxin, maytansinoids, and tasidotin.
78 Colchicine-site binders include colchicine and its analogs, podophyllotoxin, combretastatins, CI-980,
80 2-methoxyestradiol, phenylahistins (diketopiperazine), steganacins, and curacins^{17,18}. Some of the
82 destabilizing agents, including the hemisterilins, estramustine, noscapine, herbicides such as
84 carbendazim, psychoactive drugs such as phenytoin, and food components such as sulforaphane
86 found in cruciferous vegetables^{19,20}, bind to novel sites on tubulin. The “microtubule-stabilizing”
88 agents enhance microtubule polymerization at high drug concentrations and include taxol (paclitaxel,
90 Taxol™), docetaxel (Taxotere™), the epothilones, ixabepilone (Ixempra™) and patupilone,
92 discodermolide, eleutherobins, sarcodictyins, cyclostreptin, dictyostatin, laulimalide, rhazinilam,
94 peloruside A, certain steroids and polyisoprenyl benzophenones. Most of the stabilizing agents bind
96 to the same, or an overlapping, taxoid binding site on beta tubulin which is located on the inside
98 surface of the microtubule²¹. However, two of the agents, laulimalide and peloruside A, are not
100 displaced by paclitaxel and for this reason are believed to bind to a novel site on tubulin^{22,23}. Overall
several hundred compounds have been reported to arrest mitosis by their effects on microtubules. In
all cases where it has been investigated, they do so most potently by suppressing microtubule
dynamics^{24,25}.

86 ***Suppression of microtubule dynamics***

88 Both classes of drugs, those that increase and those that decrease microtubule polymerization at
90 high concentrations, potently suppress microtubule dynamics at 10 to 100-fold lower concentrations.
92 The sensitivity of microtubule dynamics to regulation means that both kinds of microtubule-
94 regulating drugs can kinetically stabilize the microtubules without changing the microtubule polymer
96 mass. At a very basic mechanistic level, these two classes of drugs act similarly to block mitosis.
98 Supporting this common mechanism of action is the finding that taxanes and vincas or estramustine
100 can be combined clinically in chemotherapy regimens with no apparent antagonism²⁶⁻²⁸. In addition,
combinations of taxanes with vincas, estramustine or colchicine analogs have shown synergism *in*
vitro^{29,30}. At high concentrations, there are clear differences in their cellular effects on microtubule
mass³¹. However, to target cells as they enter mitosis in order to gain maximum therapeutic efficacy
it may be important it may be more important to maintain a low drug concentration in the tumor
cells or in their adjacent endothelial cells for a reasonably long duration than to achieve a brief pulse
of high intracellular drug concentration³².

102 ***Antiangiogenic and vascular-disrupting effects***

104 The tumor vasculature is a superb therapeutic target as it is easily accessible to blood-borne drugs,
and tumor cells generally die unless continually supplied with oxygen and nutrients from the blood.

106 The two approaches to inhibit vascular function are to inhibit angiogenesis (the formation of *new*
108 blood vessels), and to destroy the integrity of *existing* tumor vasculature using vascular-disrupting
110 agents³³. Formation of new blood vessels involves both proliferation and migration of endothelial
112 cells, and both of these processes appear to be extraordinarily sensitive to microtubule-targeted
drugs^{25,34}. It has been suggested that prolonged exposure times and frequent dosing of low
concentrations of microtubule-targeted drugs, the so-called “metronomic” schedules, may favor the
antiangiogenic properties of these agents but clinical confirmation of such an effect will require both
randomized trials and the demonstration of an antiangiogenic effect in patients^{32,35}.

114 Since the late 1990’s, the combretastatins and N-acetylcolchicinol-O-phosphate, compounds that
116 resemble colchicine and bind in the colchicine domain on tubulin, have undergone extensive
118 development as vascular-disrupting agents³⁶. When combretastatin-A-4 phosphate (CA-4-P) is
added to cultures of endothelial cells, microtubules rapidly depolymerize, cells become round within
minutes, bleb and detach³⁷. When administered to rodents, the bloodflow may drop by >95% in less
than an hour, vascular permeability increases and haemorrhaging from peripheral tumor vessels
occurs³⁸⁻⁴⁰. These vascular-disrupting agents appear to be fairly specific for tumor vasculature
although the reasons for this specificity are not known. Since the targeted endothelial cells are non-
tumor cells, a potential advantage of this approach is that the cells may be less susceptible to the
development of resistance to these drugs than genetically unstable tumor cells. The development of
these agents has also prompted novel methods aiming to evaluate changes in tumor perfusion, such
as dynamic MRI measurements of gadolinium diethylenetriaminepentaacetate uptake and washout,
and positron emission tomography of ¹⁵O-labeled water or dynamic contrast enhanced magnetic
resonance imaging.⁴⁰⁻⁴²

128 Several currently-used microtubule-targeted agents, such as the vinca alkaloids, damage tumor
130 vasculature in animal models. It is our belief that the difference between these classical anti-mitotic
132 anti-proliferative microtubule-targeted agents and the novel agents that are undergoing clinical
134 testing as vascular-disrupting agents may rely on the fact that the effects of novel vascular-disrupting
136 agents are more rapidly reversible, either because of the reversibility of their binding to tubulin, or
their lack of long-term retention in cells. Those agents which exert depolymerizing effects over a
short period of time may act best as anti-vascular agents while those that are retained and induce a
long-term mitotic arrest may work best as antiproliferative agents.

138

Mechanisms of resistance

140 Understanding mechanisms of resistance to microtubule-binding agents is a key element in the
142 development of novel, more potent microtubule-targeted compounds. Resistance to microtubule-
144 binding agents can occur at several levels in the pharmacodynamics of these agents, including
146 primarily cellular efflux of the anticancer agents, ineffective interaction with the target, and deficient
induction of apoptosis. In addition, resistant tumors and cell lines show a multitude of changes in
protein and microRNA expression whose relationship to the actions of microtubules is not always
easy to discern.

148

ABC proteins and drug efflux

150 Membrane efflux pumps of the ATP binding cassette (ABC) family represent the primary resistance
152 mechanism developed by tumor cells when these are exposed to microtubule binding agents *in vitro*
154⁴³. While Pgp, the product of the *mdr1* gene is responsible for the “classical multidrug resistant
156 phenotype” (MDR) and actively effluxes both vincas and taxanes, thereby reducing their intracellular
concentrations and cytotoxic activity, other transporters transport only some types of antitubulin
agents. Vincas are actively transported by the MRP1 protein, taxanes are substrates for MRP2 and

MRP7, and epothilone B is transported by MRP7⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶. Given the potential importance of these efflux pumps as mechanisms of resistance to chemotherapy, newer agents which are insensitive to active efflux have been identified and further developed (Table 1). The clinical relevance of ABC pumps in patients with cancer remains controversial, with limited data to support the routine study of these proteins in patients⁴⁷. While the expression of these pumps in primary tumors often correlates with a lower response rate to therapy with microtubule-targeted agents, the presence and/or function of ABC proteins in clinical samples is not generally used to tailor therapy in individual patients due to difficulties in standardizing assays^{48,49}. Attempts to reverse drug resistance by combining microtubule agents with inhibitors of drug efflux proteins have been disappointing⁵⁰. Conversely, the fact that microtubule-binding agents constitute substrates for ABC efflux pumps significantly limits their diffusion inside the central nervous system, and constitutes an obstacle to their oral administration, suggesting that novel compounds which are less susceptible to transport by ABC proteins could possess original pharmacokinetic profiles⁵¹.

Alterations in microtubules

A second level of resistance to antitubulin agents consists in alterations in the target of these agents, the tubulin/microtubule complex. Qualitative or quantitative modifications of microtubules which can influence drug binding or the effects of drug binding on tubulin conformation and/or GTPase activity are likely to influence sensitivity to microtubule binding agents. These microtubule-based mechanisms of resistance to microtubule binding agents are extremely varied, and concern either individual components of the microtubule array itself or regulatory proteins. A variety of proteins participate in tubulin protein folding, tubulin dimer sequestration, microtubule dynamics or interact with microtubules and tubulin and participate in their regulatory pathways. These include the proteins FHit, survivin, MAP2, MAP4, stathmin, STOP and survivin^{24,52-57}. Alterations in the levels, intracellular localizations (nuclear or cytoplasmic), post-translational modifications and function of these proteins are likely to influence sensitivity to microtubule binding agents.

Microtubules are composed of at least 13 isotypes of α - and β -tubulin. The quantitative tubulin isotype composition of microtubules has been reported to influence sensitivity to microtubule binding agents. Most notably, increased levels of beta tubulin III is associated with reduced response rates to taxanes in several tumors including lung, breast and ovarian cancers^{54,58}. In contrast, epothilones may be indifferent to beta III tubulin content⁵⁹. In addition to beta III tubulin, increased levels of beta V and beta II tubulins have also been associated with taxane resistance⁶⁰⁻⁶². In contrast, decreased expression of class III beta-tubulin and increased levels of MAP4 protein have been detected in vinca resistant cell lines along with increased microtubule stability in these resistant cells as identified by the high levels of polymerized tubulin⁶³. However, in contrast, small interfering RNA-mediated knockdown of either betaII- or betaIVb-tubulin hypersensitized lung cancer cell lines to Vinca alkaloids⁶⁴. It is worth noting that the role of beta III tubulin expression in cancer may extend beyond its role in drug resistance. Recent studies have found that beta III tubulin appears to be a "survival factor" that can increase the incidence and progression of cancer irrespective of drug treatments⁶⁵. These preclinical data have been confirmed in the clinic since high levels of beta III tubulin have been found to be associated with worse prognosis and lower response rates in a variety of tumor types^{58,66}.

There are several reports of mutations in tubulin genes in cell lines resistant to microtubule binding agents⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹. However, confirmation of these observations in the clinic is currently lacking. In spite of early suggestions that mutations in the taxol binding site were found in patients with NSCLC⁷⁰, subsequent studies have found no evidence that polymorphisms in beta tubulin genes are frequent events in clinical samples^{71,72}.

Resistance due to deficient apoptotic signaling

212 A third mechanism of resistance to microtubule binding agents involves apoptotic signalling
214 downstream of the microtubule insults to which tumor cells are exposed. Microtubules physically
216 interact with a variety of cell organelles and various regulatory proteins (Box 2). An interesting case is
218 that of P53 protein and sensitivity to taxol. High hopes were raised by the observation that
220 inactivation of P53 — a common mechanism of resistance to anticancer agents — induced
222 preferential sensitivity to taxol in normal human or murine fibroblasts⁷³. However, later observations
224 suggested that P53 status had little or no impact on sensitivity to taxanes^{74,75}. Several studies have
226 failed to establish P53 as a predictive factor of response to taxanes in the clinic^{76,77}. p53 may
228 influence sensitivity to microtubule binding agents by regulating microtubule composition and
230 dynamics thereby suggesting that p53 is not only a guardian of the genome but also of the
232 microtubule cytoskeleton as well⁵⁷. Apoptotic regulators or effectors also influence sensitivity to
234 taxanes, for example a small molecule inhibitor of BclXL sensitized tumor cells to paclitaxel⁷⁸.

236 It is also becoming clear that the balance of expression of proteins that have no currently recognized
238 direct interactions with microtubules or tubulin can also play a role in resistance or sensitivity to
240 microtubule-targeted drugs, possibly through a complex web of interactions with other proteins that
242 are part of the recognized microtubule functions in transport, cell cycle, signalling, and apoptosis.
244 Examples of these include prohibitin, glutathione-S-transferase π , α -defensins, inflammation, GTSE-1
(G(2) and S phase-expressed-1)-protein modulation of p21, and hypoxia and hypoxia-inducible factor
1 α {Bublik #249;Patel #250;Huang #251;Bauer #252;Townsend, 2003 #253}. Micro RNAs have also
232 been found to contribute to resistance to microtubule-targeted drugs. For example miR-125b
234 conferred resistance to paclitaxel by suppressing the pro-apoptotic BAK1 and miR-148a increased
236 sensitivity to paclitaxel by decreasing expression of mitogen and stress-activated protein kinase
238 MSK1 {Zhou #254;Fujita #255}.

Novel microtubule targeted agents and/or formulations

240 Microtubule-binding agents are unique among anticancer agents not only because of their original
242 mechanisms of action but also because of their extreme structural diversity. In most cases natural
244 agents with potent antitumor activity have led the way for original synthetic analogues. Surprisingly
this remains true even for the vinca and taxane families, the first members of which have been in
clinical use for decades (Table 2).

Vinca domain binding agents

246 Vinca alkaloids (vincristine, vinblastine, vindesine and vinorelbine), originally isolated from the
248 periwinkle plant *Catharanthus rosea*, represent the oldest and to this day most diversified family (in
terms of number of approved compounds within a given family) of microtubule targeted agents.
250 Vinflunine (Javlor™), a novel fluorinated compound which was obtained by superacid transformation
252 of vinorelbine in the presence of fluorhydric acid, has recently been approved for the second-line
254 treatment of bladder cancer⁸⁶. Also a liposomal formulation of the off-patent agent vincristine,
which allows a prolonged and regular delivery of this active compound, is currently the object of
clinical trials.

256 The dolastatin family, originally identified by isolation of marine peptides from the ocean shell-less
258 mollusk *Dolabella auricularia*, includes dolastatin 10, cemadotin, tasidotin (ILX651), soblidotin, and
malevamide E⁸⁷. While dolastatin 10 itself was not active in patients with various tumors including
260 advanced breast cancer or pancreaticobiliary cancers, its analog soblidotin induced minor responses
in patients with NSCLC and a partial response in a patient with advanced esophageal cancer in a
phase I trial but was not further evaluated in a phase II trial^{88,89}. Romidepsin, a dolastatin 15 analog

262 which also possesses activity as an HDAC inhibitor, was recently found to be active in cutaneous T cell
lymphoma, with a 34% objective response rate.⁹⁰

264 Eribulin mesylate, a synthetic halichondrin derivative, was found to be active in patients with
266 metastatic breast cancer relapsing after anthracyclines and taxanes. In a randomized phase III trial
patients receiving single agent eribulin mesylate benefited from significant improvement in overall
survival when compared to patients treated according to physician's choice⁹¹.

268

Taxol domain binding agents

270 Besides paclitaxel (Taxol™) and docetaxel (Taxotere™), cabazitaxel (Jevtana™, XRP 6258, RPR116258,
Sanofi-Aventis) has displayed promising results in patients with breast and prostate cancer and has
272 recently been approved by the FDA for the treatment of hormone-resistant metastatic prostate
cancer after failure of docetaxel^{92,93}. Issues with currently available taxanes include their mode of
274 administration, currently limited to the intravenous route, their poor water solubility, requiring the
use of surfactants such as Cremophor and ethanol for intravenous administration, with an associated
276 risk of hypersensitivity reactions^{94,95}, and the nearly universal recurrence of disease when patients
are treated in the advanced setting. Some of the novel taxanes are poor substrates for ABC transport
278 pumps and may in some cases be administered orally or pass through the blood-brain barrier, a
particularly important property for the treatment of CNS metastases.

280 Conversely a phase II trial evaluating BMS 275183 given orally twice weekly in patients with relapsing
282 NSCLC was terminated because of highly variable pharmacokinetics. Unpredictable individual
pharmacokinetics is a major limitation in the development and use of orally administered anticancer
284 agents.

286 Novel taxane formulations are being developed with the intent of reducing issues associated with
poor solubility or hypersensitivity. In a phase III trial comparing nanoparticle albumin-bound
288 paclitaxel (Abraxane™, nab-paclitaxel) and conventional docetaxel for the therapy of patients with
metastatic breast cancer, nab-paclitaxel was associated with better outcome as well as with a lower
290 rate of severe neutropenia and a similar rate of reversible sensory neuropathy⁹⁶. Nab-paclitaxel has
also demonstrated activity in other settings including melanoma, gynaecological tumors and prostate
292 cancer⁹⁷⁻⁹⁹. Several novel generic formulations of paclitaxel and docetaxel aim to eliminate
surfactants from current formulations, which may eventually lead to reduced hypersensitivity
294 reactions¹⁰⁰.

296 Epothilones were originally isolated from the myxobacterium *Sorangium cellulosum*. They represent
a promising novel family of agents for cancer treatment as they may retain activity against taxane-
298 resistant tumors^{101,102}. Epothilones are easier to produce than taxanes, display good water solubility
and do not appear to be substrates for the Pgp efflux pump¹⁰³, allowing passage through the blood
300 brain barrier¹⁰⁴. Besides ixabepilone (Ixempra™), a semisynthetic analog of epothilone B, which is
currently approved for the treatment of advanced taxane-resistant breast cancer in the United
302 States, several other epothilones are currently being studied in clinical trials. These include
patupilone¹⁰⁵, sagopilone¹⁰⁶⁻¹⁰⁸ and KOS-862 (epothilone D)^{109,110} which are being evaluated in
304 various solid tumor types.
306

Colchicine domain binding agents

310 Combretastatins represent an exciting family of microtubule targeted agents as they are lead
compounds of the vascular targeting or vascular disrupting agents, compounds which produce rapid
312 disruption of tumor blood flow, probably by their effects on the microtubule cytoskeleton of
endothelial cells. In phase I trials combretastatin A4 (CA4), isolated from the *Combretum caffrum*
314 tree, induced unusual toxicities including tumor pain, ataxia and cardiovascular modifications,
including prolonged QTc interval and ECG modifications consistent with acute coronary syndrome¹¹¹⁻
316¹¹³. Fosbretabulin (CA4 phosphate) is currently being evaluated in combination trials in patients with

318 anaplastic thyroid cancer and with chemotherapy naïve lung cancer¹¹⁴. Other antivasular agents
319 that have undergone clinical evaluation include ZD6126¹¹⁵, OXI4503¹¹⁶, ombrabulin (AVE8062A)¹¹⁷,
320 crinobulin (EPC2407)¹¹⁸ as well as auristatin PE (TZT-1027, a dolastatin derivative)¹¹⁹ which binds in
321 the Vinca domain. A key issue for the approval of this family of agents will be the lack of significant
322 toxicity on normal vasculature, as well as the mode of administration in combination with other
323 agents.

324 Additional agents binding at or near the colchicine binding site of tubulin such as CI-980 and 1069C85
325 have been discontinued while ABT-751, and indibulin are currently in phase I¹²⁰. 2-methoxyestradiol
326 (ME2), displayed limited activity in patients with hormone-refractory prostate cancer¹²¹, breast
327 cancer¹²² and multiple myeloma¹²³ leading to improved formulations consisting of nanocrystal
328 colloidal solutions¹²⁴. The lack of myelosuppression by ME2 has been attributed to the resistance of
329 the hematopoietic-specific beta tubulin to this agent¹²⁵.

330

331 **Other agents**

332
333 Several other agents with original properties have undergone clinical evaluation. Cevipabulin (TTI-
334 237) is an unusual agent which appears to bind the vinca site but promotes microtubule
335 polymerization¹²⁶. Noscapine, which has the ability to cross the blood-brain barrier¹²⁷ is currently
336 being evaluated in a phase I/II trial in patients with multiple myeloma (NCT00912899). A number of
337 analogs with increased potency are under investigation.

340

341 **Toxicity of microtubule targeted agents**

342 The evaluation of some microtubule binding agents has been discontinued because of significant
343 toxicity. This is exemplified by the discodermolides which are highly potent natural polyketide
344 products isolated from the Caribbean sponge *Discodermia dissolute*, which appear to be synergistic
345 with taxol^{128,129}. A phase I trial of this compound (Novartis) initiated in 2004 was interrupted because
346 of significant pulmonary toxicity. Dictyostatin is a structurally related compound for which the total
347 synthesis has recently been obtained¹³⁰. Cryptophycins were obtained from cyanobacteria or were
348 prepared by total synthesis. While some disease stabilisation was observed in patients receiving
349 cryptophycin 52 (LY355703), there were no responses in patients treated for advanced NSCLC in spite
350 of significant neurological toxicity^{131,132}.

352

353 **Neurological toxicity**

354 A major limitation in the use of microtubule-targeted agents is the high rate of neuropathy induced
355 by these compounds¹³³. This potentially severe and dose-limiting side effect, which is dose-
356 cumulative and more frequent in patients with preexisting neuropathy, be it due to chronic
357 alcoholism or diabetes mellitus, usually manifests itself as a painful and debilitating peripheral axonal
358 neuropathy for which there is currently no effective symptomatic treatment¹³⁴. This has prompted
359 the search for predictive factors such as neurologic function tests or biological markers such as
360 myelin basic protein and gliofibrillar acid protein¹³⁵⁻¹³⁷. Other manifestations include constipation or
361 intestinal paralysis due to neurological toxicity against the autonomic nervous system. While
362 symptoms tend to disappear a few months after the end of treatment, some patients retain
363 significant sequelae several years after therapy. The preferential toxicity of these agents for the
364 nervous system is not understood at a mechanistic level but can be partially explained both by the
365 relative abundance of tubulin in neurons, and the importance of an intact, functional microtubule
366 cytoskeleton for adequate nerve conduction.

368 Peripheral neuropathy has been a limiting factor in the development of several agents, leading, as in
369 the case of cryptophycins, to termination of their development. In contrast, there have been few
370 reports of central nervous system (CNS) toxicity with the currently administered agents, partly due to
the fact that they are Pgp efflux pump substrates and thus do not cross the blood brain barrier. The

372 development of newer agents which are not substrates of Pgp might be associated with CNS toxicity,
374 or with activity against tumors within the CNS¹⁰⁴. The question of neuropathy is particularly
376 important when considering the combination of these agents with other potentially neurotoxic
378 agents. Among the classical agents, the platinum compounds, which induce peripheral neurotoxicity
380 to various degrees, are commonly used in combination with taxanes and vincas, in particular in
382 patients with NSCLC or with germ cell tumors, in the latter case with a large proportion of long term
384 survivors¹³⁸. Among the more recently approved agents, several compounds, such as bortezomib or
thalidomide, can also induce high grade peripheral neuropathy in a significant proportion of patients.
The mechanisms of neurotoxicity have not been precisely determined for all of these compounds and
may or may not be related to microtubules^{139,140}. The combination of these agents with microtubule-
targeted agents may therefore prove to be difficult and assays, quite likely based on genetic
polymorphisms, predicting high grade sensory neuropathy in individual patients would be of great
use.

386 A major difficulty in the screening of novel agents is the lack of adequate preclinical models of drug-
388 induced peripheral neuropathy. Glial cell cultures are extensively used to analyse this type of toxicity
390 *in vitro*, but animal models that reliably correlate with or predict neurotoxicity in patients remain
392 imperfect¹⁴¹⁻¹⁴⁵. The development of reliable predictive models would be of great use for the future
394 development of novel agents and of neuroprotective compounds. Alternatively the identification of
396 differences between the microtubule cytoskeleton in peripheral nerves and tumor cells could serve
398 as a basis to design or select novel agents with reduced neuropathy. Eribulin induced no significant
400 reduction in nerve conduction velocity or amplitude in caudal and digital nerves when administered
to mice at the maximal tolerated dose¹⁴⁶. Phase I and II clinical trials of eribulin demonstrated
significant activity with only a low incidence of neuropathy and no grade 4 neuropathy¹⁴⁷. Indibulin
(ZIO-301/D-24851) has been reported to distinguish between mature neuronal tubulin and non-
neuronal tubulin and has entered clinical evaluation as an oral formulation^{148,149}. In a phase I study,
ispinesib (SB-715992), a kinesin inhibitor was found to induce myelosuppression but no neurotoxicity¹⁵⁰.
Phase II trials evaluating ispinesib as a single agent have not yet demonstrated significant activity^{151,152}.

402 **Other toxicities**

404 Myeloid toxicity is frequently observed with microtubule-targeted agents, with subtle differences
406 between compounds within the same family¹⁵³. Neutropenia is often the most frequent and/or
408 severe side-effect observed in combination regimens including these agents^{70,86,154}. In several recent
410 phase II studies neutropenia was one of the dose-limiting toxicities^{88,155-158}. This toxicity, which is
412 often added to similar toxicities of other agents used in combination regimens, is usually
414 manageable. In contrast, some toxicities are relatively compound specific, such as fluid retention
416 observed in patients receiving docetaxel or diarrhoea after patupilone therapy¹⁵⁹⁻¹⁶¹.

412 An intriguing issue concerns the possible mutagenic properties of microtubule binding agents and
414 henceforth the risk that they may increase the risk of secondary tumors. Given the fact that cells
416 exposed to these compounds can develop aneuploidy due to missegregation, there is a theoretical
418 risk that these agents might increase the risk of iatrogenic leukemias and/or solid tumors.
420 Chromosomal instability and an aneuploid-prone phenotype have been described to be correlated
422 with response to taxanes^{162,163}. Administration of paclitaxel to nude mice and to rhesus monkeys has
424 caused prolonged aneugenicity and abnormal mitoses, respectively, but clinical confirmation of such
an effect has yet to be demonstrated^{163,164}. As these agents have been widely used in combination
with alkylating agents, and the initial indications mostly concerned patients whose life expectancy
was short, it has been difficult to establish whether these agents are potentially carcinogenic *per se*.
As a result of the widespread use of these agents in the adjuvant setting, in patients whose prognosis
may be globally favorable, the question of whether microtubule-targeted agents increase the risk of
secondary neoplasms has become clinically relevant.

426 **Improving therapy with microtubule-targeted agents**

428 Microtubules represent a highly-validated target in cancer therapy, explaining the abundance of
430 efforts to develop novel agents directed against this target. All of the currently approved compounds
432 bind directly to tubulin, either to soluble tubulin or to tubulin that is polymerized into microtubules,
434 although the binding occurs at different sites on the tubulin molecule or to different regions of the
436 microtubule. Novel approaches aim to improve upon existing compounds either by selecting agents
that are insensitive to resistance mechanisms, that increase tumor selectivity, that reduce side
effects such as peripheral neuropathy or by targeting the numerous other components of the
tubulin/microtubule complex.

438 Several promising agents have been reported in preclinical models. These include eleutherobin¹⁶⁵,
440 laulimalide^{166,167}, hemiasterlins¹⁶⁸, peloruside A^{22,169}, taccalonolide¹⁷⁰, coumarins¹⁷¹ and
442 cyclostreptin¹⁷². Most of the novel agents have been selected because of their activity in models that
444 show resistance to taxanes. Several of these novel agents are not substrates of efflux pumps such as
446 Pgp or other ATP-Binding Cassette proteins. In some cases these agents are also insensitive to the
448 presence of mutations in beta tubulin and/or to overexpression of specific tubulin isoforms, in
450 particular tubulin β III. This has led some investigators to identify either β III-indifferent agents, or β III-
452 targeted agents^{170,173}. The demonstration that tumor aggressivity and in some cases of sensitivity to
454 chemotherapy is influenced by the content of β III tubulin isotype suggests that the development of
456 agents targeting this isotype would be of particular interest in patients with high risk disease due to
458 high expression of this isotype. Such a strategy is corroborated by the reports that inhibition of
tubulin III by oligonucleotides and by silencing RNA induced sensitization of tumor cells to various
anticancer agents^{62,64}. In this regard, secotaxoids, which are predicted to bind well to beta III tubulin
isotype and retain activity in paclitaxel resistant preclinical models appeared to be particularly
promising but have not been further evaluated in the scope of recent clinical trials¹⁷⁴. Another
attractive approach involves vectorisation of microtubule binding agents to the tumor cell using a
monoclonal antibody. Maytansine conjugates are being studied in various indications, in particular in
haematological diseases and breast cancer¹⁷⁵⁻¹⁷⁷. A recent trial of trastuzumab-DM1, a
maytansinoid conjugated to the anti-HER2 therapeutic antibody trastuzumab, showed good efficacy
in metastatic breast cancer and the CD-56 targeting antibody-maytansine conjugate, lorvotuzumab-
mertansine, has shown promising results in solid and liquid tumors that express CD56^{178,179}.

460 It is now clear that alterations in microtubule dynamics are the main mechanism of action of
462 microtubule binding agents^{24,180}. Given the multiple roles of microtubules, several proteins other
464 than tubulin itself are likely to constitute therapeutic targets in cancer cells. These potential targets
466 include proteins involved in the lifecycle of tubulin peptides and dimers as well as proteins involved
468 in microtubule nucleation, dynamics, and interaction with chromosomes or cellular organelles. Of
470 particular interest are the motor proteins such as kinesin Eg5 (for which the first inhibitors such as
AZD4877 are currently being evaluated¹⁸¹) and tau protein¹⁸², a key microtubule-associated protein
which has been correlated with outcome in patients with breast cancer. Another potential target is
survivin¹⁸³, a protein that is intimately involved in spindle microtubule behaviour as well as apoptosis.
Other potential targets include MCAK, a mitotic centromere-associated protein that regulates
microtubule dynamics¹⁸⁴, and stathmin¹⁸⁵, an important regulator of the soluble tubulin dimer pool as
well as dynamics.

472 Another important avenue for the optimization of microtubule binding agents is the identification of
474 patient subsets most susceptible to respond to therapy or to develop significant toxicity, using
476 tumor-related parameters or patient characteristics¹⁸⁶. This approach is of particular interest in
478 diseases such as lung cancer, in which there are several therapeutic alternatives, none of which has
clearly proven to be superior¹⁸⁷. A randomized trial is currently analyzing the potential benefit of
ixabepilone in patients with β III tubulin-positive lung cancer (NCT00723957). Analyses of targeted
polymorphisms in patients receiving microtubule-binding agents has not yet allowed the

480 identification of patients with the highest chance of response or the highest risk of developing dose-
482 limiting side effects of chemotherapy¹⁸⁸. High throughput analyses of large patient cohorts and
validation series will help establish personalized therapy with microtubule-binding agents.

Concluding thoughts

484 In light of the development of microtubule-targeted agents over the past decades, the recent
486 approvals of a novel vinca alkaloid, a novel taxane and the first epothilone, and the recent advances
488 in the understanding of the role of the microtubule cytoskeleton in cancer cells, the stakes are high
490 that this family of anticancer compounds not only will still be in use years from now, but will also will
be considerably enriched with less toxic and highly active molecules. The tremendous diversity of
naturally occurring compounds interacting with mammalian microtubules represents a largely
untapped source for future anticancer agents. A major aim in this very dynamic field will be to purify,
screen and ultimately offer to the cancer patient the best of nature's gems.

Legends to Figures

Figure 1. Chemical structures of microtubule binding agents according to binding domains

This figure shows the extreme chemical diversity as well as the complexity of many of these agents.

The complex structure of certain natural compounds explains the difficulty encountered by chemists to perform total synthesis of these molecules.

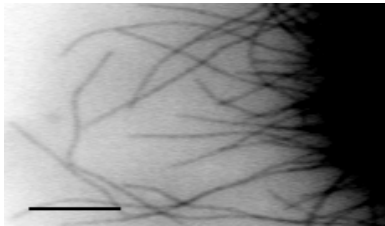
Figure 2. Microtubule formation and binding sites of microtubule inhibitors

Fig 2A. Soluble tubulin dimers containing one alpha tubulin peptide and one beta tubulin peptide polymerize to form a "nucleus". Additional dimers are added head-to-tail and the resulting microtubules are highly dynamic structures containing a (+) end characterized by an exposed β tubulin peptide and a (-) end characterized by an exposed α tubulin peptide.

Fig 2B. Binding sites of microtubule inhibitors. While vinca alkaloids bind to microtubule ends, colchicine binds to soluble dimers which can be incorporated within the microtubules. Taxanes bind along the interior surface of the microtubules.

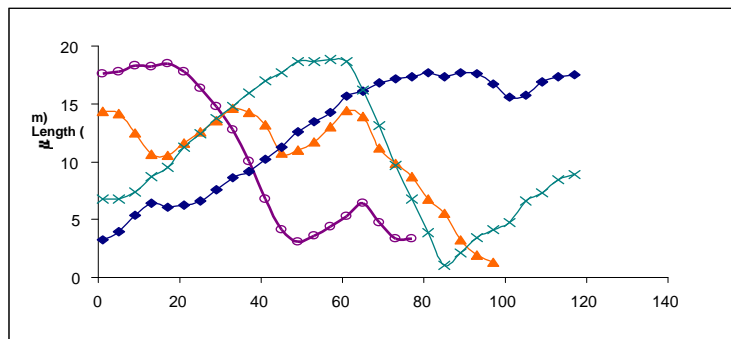
Box 1. Microtubule dynamics

Microtubules are dynamic structures composed of $\alpha\beta$ -tubulin molecules that are constantly integrated or shed into the cytoplasm as the microtubules dramatically grow and shorten. Dynamics can be measured in live cells using fluorescently labelled tubulin (either labelled ex vitro and microinjected or using an expressed GFP-tag) and video-microscopy. Several parameters of dynamics can be assessed to determine the effects of microtubule targeted drugs on dynamics. These include the rates and durations of growing and shortening events and the mean frequency of rescue or catastrophe. Although these parameters are generally analysed on interphase cytoplasmic microtubules and not on spindle microtubules, systems using markers of the ends of spindle microtubules such as GFP-CENP-B have found that the suppressive effects of drugs on dynamics of interphase microtubules are very similar to their suppressive effects on mitotic microtubules.

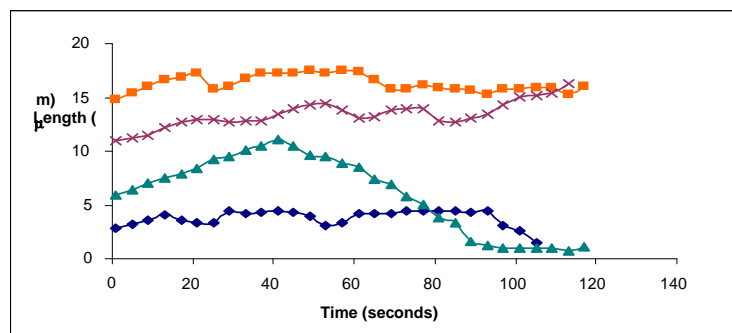


Box 1A: Time-lapse sequence analysis of microtubules, using fluorescent-labelled tubulin microinjected into human mammary adenocarcinoma MCF7 cells

Control



7.5 nM paclitaxel



Box 1B: Reduced length changes of individual microtubules in the presence of taxol show suppression of microtubule dynamic instability by taxol

Box 2. Interactions of microtubules with other proteins and cellular organelles

Microtubules interact with a variety of intracellular components including mitochondria, the Golgi apparatus, the endoplasmic reticulum, and lysosomes. In the mitotic spindle microtubules allow the proper alignment of chromosomes during metaphase, followed by the equal distribution of chromatids to the two daughter cells during anaphase. This phenomenon relies on the physical interaction between microtubule (+) ends of the microtubules and the kinetochores.

A number of key proteins involved in cell cycle and/or apoptosis have also been shown to physically interact with microtubules. P53 is physically associated with dynein, a microtubule motor protein. Bcl2, survivin and several other proteins that play a role in cell survival also colocalize with microtubules although it is not clear whether microtubules serve as molecular scaffolds for these proteins to exert their activity or whether the proteins are sequestered by microtubules and therefore functionally inactive.

Glossary

Adjuvant therapy: a treatment which is administered to patients with minimal or no detectable sign of disease, in order to prevent disease recurrence

Catastrophe: the switch of a growing or stable microtubule end to rapid shortening

Dynamics: the nonequilibrium dynamic behaviors of microtubules in cells which are crucial to their functions. The two kinds consist of "dynamic instability" in which the ends of individual microtubules randomly switch between phases of growth and shortening and "treadmilling" which consists of net growth at one microtubule end and a balanced net shortening at the opposite end resulting in a flow of tubulin subunits through the microtubules. Microtubule dynamics are much faster during mitosis than in interphase and are crucial to cell division, making mitotic cells highly susceptible to microtubule-targeted drugs. They are also important in the trafficking of elements within the cell and for cell migration; their suppression is thought to impair cell metastasis.

Kinetochores: the complex assemblage of proteins at the chromosome centromere to which dynamic mitotic spindle microtubules attach, ultimately producing equal segregation of chromosomes to the daughter cells.

Microtubule-associated proteins (MAPs): a number of proteins bind very tightly to microtubules and can be purified along with the microtubules. The most famous of these are tau and Microtubule-associated proteins 2 and 4. In addition, many proteins can bind less tightly to microtubules in cells and regulate their behaviour.

Microtubule binding agents: drugs and endogenous regulators of microtubule dynamics can bind selectively to several sites on a microtubule. They can bind preferentially to one or both microtubule ends (vincas, eribulin, cryptophycins, maytansinoids and others) or to the sides of the microtubule (taxanes, epothilones). They may also copolymerize into the microtubule with the tubulin (colchicines).

Tubulin dimer: the heterodimeric protein subunit that polymerizes into microtubules. Each subunit is composed of one α -tubulin and one β -tubulin molecule.

Tubulin isotype: there are at least 13 different isotypes of α - and β -tubulin. The tubulin isotype composition of cells varies between cell types within the same tissue and between tissues. For example, brain cells contain high amounts of β III-tubulin, but non-neuronal cells generally contain only low amounts of this isotype. Isotype content also differs between tumor cells and the non-tumor cells of the same tissue. The complement of tubulin isotypes can be induced to change in response to treatment by many drugs.

Rescue: the switch of a shortening microtubule end to growth or to a state of stable microtubule length

Agent	Sensitivity to ABC efflux pumps	Sensitivity to β-tubulin content	references
Vincas	MDR sensitive MRP sensitive	Sensitive to β III-tubulin content	44,189-191
Cryptophycins	MDR insensitive	n.a.	192,193
Dolastatins	MDR sensitive	n.a.	194
Taxanes	MDR sensitive MRP2 and MRP7 sensitive	Sensitive to β III-tubulin content	45,46
Epothilones	MDR sensitive	No	103,195
Discodermolides	MDR sensitive MRP1 sensitive	Sensitive to β III-tubulin content	196,197
Cyclostreptin	MDR insensitive	n.a.	172
Laulimalides	MDR insensitive	n.a.	198
Taccalonolide	MDR insensitive	More active if high beta III content	170
Peloruside	MDR insensitive	n.a.	169
Hemiasterlin	MDR insensitive	n.a.	168
Combretastatins	MDR insensitive	Yes	199-201
2 methoxyestradiol	MDR insensitive	Inactive against beta I	125,202

Table 1. Characteristics of microtubule binding agents

MDR: multidrug resistance; ABC: ATP Binding Cassette transport pumps; n.a.: not available

Binding domain	Family	Agent	Approved Indications *	Clinical trials	Comments	
Vinca	Vincas	Vincristine	ALL, lymphomas Various solid tumors	Various tumor types	Natural compound Generic Parenteral administration	
		Vinblastine	Lymphomas Various solid tumors	Various tumor types	Natural compound Generic Parenteral administration	
		Vinorelbine	Breast, NSCLC	Various tumor types	Semi-synthetic Generic Oral and parenteral administration	
		Vindesine	ALL, lymphoma Lung cancer	Various tumor types	Semi-synthetic Generic Parenteral administration	
		Vinflunine (Javlor®, Pierre Fabre)	Bladder	Breast in combination with Herceptin	Semi-synthetic Parenteral administration	
		Liposomal vincristine	-	leukemia melanoma, myeloma, sarcoma	Prolonged and regular delivery	
	Dolastatins	soblidotin (TZT-1027)	-	Phase I in advanced solid tumors No ongoing trials	Responses in NSCLC and esophageal cancer	
		romidepsin Istodax® Gloucester Pharmaceuticals	Cutaneous T cell lymphoma	Myeloma, lymphoma, solid tumors	Dolastatin 15 analog	
		brentuximab vedotin (SGN 35)	-	Phase III trial recruiting in Hodgkin's disease	Antibody-vectorized agent directed against CD30 positive malignancies	
	Cryptophycins	Cryptophycin 52 LY355703	-	Phase II NSCLC Terminated	Caused significant neurological toxicity	
	Halichondrin	Eribulin (E7389, NSC 707389)	-	Phase III in advanced breast cancer	Improved OS when compared to treatment of physician's choice	
	Hemiasterlin	E-7974	-	Phase I	Hematological MTD	
	Maytansinoids	Mertansine immunoconjugates (BT-062, IMGN388, BIIB015)	-	Head and neck, oesophagus, advance HER2 positive breast cancer, myeloma	Phase II and III underway	
	Folate vectorized vinca alkaloid	EC-145		Ovarian, endometrial, lung cancer	Folate-targeted vinca alkaloid conjugate	
	Taxane	Taxanes	Paclitaxel Taxol®	Ovarian, breast, NSCLC	Various solid tumor types	May induce hypersensitivity reactions
			Docetaxel Taxotere®	Breast, NSCLC, prostate, stomach, head and neck	Various solid tumor types	May induce hypersensitivity reactions
cabazitaxel (XRP6258) Jevtana®			Metastatic hormone-resistant prostate		Approved June 2010	
Milataxel (MAC-321, TL-139)			-	Phase II mesothelioma	Active in preclinical models of resistance to taxanes ^{203,204}	
Larotaxel (XRP9881)			-	Phase III pancreatic	Active in preclinical models of resistance to taxanes, poor MDR substrate ²⁰⁵⁻²⁰⁷	
Ortataxel IDN-5109 BAY 59-8862			-	Phase II taxane-resistant tumors	Active in Pgp-expressing models ²⁰⁸	
Tesetaxel			-	Phase II gastric	Oral administration	

		DJ-927		Phase II colorectal Phase II melanoma	Is not transported by Pgp 209,210	
		BMS 275183	-	Phase II NSCLC Terminated	Oral administration Unpredictable pharmacokinetics	
		TPI 287 (ARC-100)	-	Phase II prostate cancer Phase I pediatric CNS cancers	Investigated in neurological tumors in combination with temozolomide	
		Nab-paclitaxel (ABI-007) Abraxane® Abraxis Bioscience Nab-docetaxel (ABI-008)	Breast cancer	Various solid tumors Prostate cancer	Shorter infusion times than paclitaxel Does not require premedication	
		NKTR-105		Phase I	PEGylated formulation of docetaxel ; pre-treatment with corticosteroids not required	
	Epothilones	Ixabepilone Ixempra® Bristol Myers Squibb	Breast cancer	Solid tumors	Several ongoing trials in solid tumors Is not a substrate for Pgp	
		Patupilone (epothilone B)	-	Brain metastases in breast cancer, ovarian, melanoma, other solid tumors	Penetrates in the CNS Is not a substrate for Pgp Possesses radiosensitizing properties	
		Sagopilone	-	Glioblastoma, prostate, lung cancers	First fully synthetic epothilone Penetrates in the CNS	
		KOS 1584 (epothilone D)	-	NSCLC Phase II	Investigated in breast and prostate cancer	
	Discodermolide	-	-	Phase I Terminated	Pulmonary toxicity	
Colchicine	CI-980	-	-	Phase II trials Terminated	No responses observed in sarcoma or colorectal cancer 211,212	
	2 methoxy-estradiol (ME2) Panzem® EntreMed	-	-	Phase II in prostate, myeloma, glioblastoma	Endogenous metabolite of estradiol with no affinity for estrogen receptor Side effects : DVT and increased transaminases	
	1069C85	-	-	Phase I Terminated	Oral administration 213	
	ABT 751 E7010	-	-	Phase II in various solid tumors No ongoing trials	Orally bioavailable sulfonamide Neurotoxicity 214	
	Indibulin	-	-	Phase I/II in metastatic breast cancer	Discriminates between neuronal and non-neuronal tubulin 148,215	
	Combretastatins	Fosbretabulin (CA4 phosphate)	-		Phase II in lung and thyroid cancer, glioma	Vascular disrupting agent
		Verubulin			Phase II glioblastoma	Vascular disrupting agent
		Crinobulin	-		Phase I	Vascular disrupting agent
		Plinabulin			Phase I	Vascular disrupting agent
		Omrabulin	-		Phase III in sarcoma	Vascular disrupting agent
Other	Noscapinoids	Noscapine	-	Phase II multiple myeloma	Oral opium alkaloid used as antitussive	
	Estramustine	-	Prostate cancer	Combination with taxanes, vincas, ixabepilone in prostate cancer	Generic Binds to microtubule associated protein	

Table 2. Selected microtubule-binding agents which have been approved or have undergone clinical evaluation

ALL: acute lymphoblastic leukemia; CNS: central nervous system; DVT: deep vein thrombosis; MTD: maximal tolerated dose; NSCLC: non small cell lung cancer; OS: overall survival; Pgp: P glycoprotein
Data in this table have been obtained from clinicaltrials.gov, Pubmed, ASCO, company sites and the Thomson Pharma Partnering database.

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Further information

Initiation of a phase I/II study of oral indibulin in breast cancer patients by ZIOPHARM

<http://ir.ziopharm.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=457504>