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Overcoming the Blood-Brain Barrier for Targeted Drug Delivery in Neurological Diseases

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ABSTRACT: An Overview of the Blood-Brain Barrier - The blood-brain barrier (BBB) is an extremely selective protective barrier between the brain & the bloodstream. The BBB is made up of specialized endothelial cells, tight junctions, and other cellular components. The BBB works as a filtering mechanism that prevents harmful substances, like pathogens & toxins from entering the brain. This protective barrier is absolutely crucial to the brain as the BBB helps it maintain a stable environment that is extremely sensitive to things like fluctuations in chemicals and other external factors like temperature changes or hormonal fluctuations. But these same properties that make the BBB so effective at what it does also creates a significant challenge for medical treatments that need to reach the brain. The BBB very effectively blocks the passage of drugs, especially large molecules & therapeutic agents that could help treat neurological diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, or brain tumors.

The Composition of the BBB & its Function - The structure of the BBB is pretty complex, with it being made up of endothelial cells packed tightly together, this same structure prevents most substances from crossing freely. This cellular "tight junction" arrangement is what gives the BBB its impermeability. These endothelial cells are surrounded by astrocytic end-feet (which connect to blood vessels beneath the brain) which provide additional support to the BBB & Pericytes (cells that wrap around small blood vessels (capillaries)) in the brain help support and stabilize them while regulating blood flow and maintaining the blood-brain barrier. Together these components help support the BBB, making sure that only vital nutrients like glucose & amino acids can pass through via the specialized transporters, while keeping out potentially harmful substances.

Why targeting the Brain is Critical in treating Neurological Diseases - Neurological diseases like neurodegenerative disorders (e.g., Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease) and brain cancers usually need direct treatment within the brain to be effective. Traditional treatment options, like oral medications or systemic injections, usually aren't successful in treating these diseases because they can't cross the BBB in sufficient amounts. As these diseases progress and have more of an impact, the need for targeted drug-delivery increases more & more. The ability to deliver these medications directly to the brain by bypassing the BBB would increase the effectiveness of the treatment, reduce side effects & just improve the overall outcome for the patients. Without an effective way to bypass the BBB, even the most effective & promising drug therapies will be ineffective in dealing with these diseases.

The Challenge of crossing the BBB with Therapeutic Drugs - Most therapeutic molecules are either too large or too polar to penetrate the barrier on their own. Even small molecule drugs struggle to pass through the BBB because of the highly selective nature of the endothelial cell membranes. Large, biologic molecules like monoclonal antibodies, gene therapies, and enzymes face huge challenges as well in getting past the BBB. Even though these biologic drugs may work well for treating other parts of the body, the fact that they often can't get past the BBB in significant amounts means that neurological treatments remain a huge obstacle in modern medicine. These limitations reduce the amount of available treatment options & the effectiveness of treatment options as well.

Drug Transport Systems in the Brain - While the BBB is a significant barrier to most drugs, it isn't completely impenetrable. The brain has numerous transport mechanisms that allow it to take in essential nutrients from the bloodstream. For example, carrier-mediated transport systems oversee the entry of glucose & amino acids into the brain. But, these natural transporters are extremely selective and are primarily designed to bring in certain substances that are absolutely necessary for brain function, not therapeutic agents. Some drugs, like L-Dopa used in Parkinson's treatment, can take advantage of glucose transporters, but are usually too limited in capacity or don't match the specific needs of the brain cells, as they cannot mimic the natural transport mechanisms effectively.



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I. MECHANISMS OF THE BBB & ENDOTHELIAL CELLS

The blood-brain barrier's selective permeability is mainly due to the specialized endothelial cells that make up the barrier. These cells are tightly connected to each other through tight junctions, which help in preventing the passage of most materials.

Tight Junctions - The tight junctions between the endothelial cells form a physical barrier that limits the movement of ions, molecules, and other substances between the cells. These junctions are made up of several proteins like claudins, occludins, and junctional adhesion molecules (JAMs). They create a very sturdy and nearly impenetrable seal that prevents large molecules and harmful substances from slipping through. The tightness of these junctions is a huge component of the BBB being so effective.

Selective Transport Mechanisms - The brain has specialized transport systems to allow vital nutrients and ions to pass through the endothelial cells. Some of these transport mechanisms are:

• Carrier-Mediated Transport: Certain nutrients, like glucose and amino acids are extremely important for the brain but can't cross through using passive diffusion because of their size & polarity. So, specialized transporter proteins embedded in the endothelial cell membranes (like the glucose transporter (GLUT) actively bring these substances across the barrier.

• Receptor-Mediated Transcytosis: This process allows large molecules like certain hormones or growth factors to enter the brain. In our case, the substance binds to a receptor on the surface of the endothelial cell, this triggers a vesicle forming that then transports it across the cell to the other side. Insulin and transferrin are some examples of some molecules that use receptor-mediated transcytosis.

• Efflux Pumps: Although the BBB allows essential nutrients to pass, it also uses ATP-dependent efflux pumps like P-glycoprotein (P-gp) to actively get rid of harmful substances.

Astrocytic Support - Endothelial cells are supported by astrocytes which are a type of glial cell. Astrocytes have endfeet that surround the blood vessels and help regulate blood flow. This interaction with endothelial cells plays a huge role in maintaining the BBB. Astrocytes also secrete signaling molecules like vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), this influences the permeability and function of the BBB.

Pericytes and Blood Flow Regulation - Pericytes are contractile cells that wrap around the capillaries in the brain. They help regulate the blood flow in the capillaries and help in the general development & maintenance of the BBB. Pericytes also work endothelial cells and help stabilize the barrier by regulating the tightness of the junctions between the endothelial cells. This relationship also influences the passage of nutrients and the ability of the BBB to stay together even under different conditions.

Inflammation & Immune Response - While the BBB is very efficient at its job, it can become more permeable during inflammatory conditions or neuroinflammation. When the brain experiences an injury or infection, the endothelial cells could temporarily change the tight junctions, this lets immune cells like T-Cells & Macrophages cross the BBB to fight the infection. But this temporary situation can also make the brain a lot more vulnerable to harmful substances & can even lead to neurological diseases progressing more.

The mechanisms behind the blood-brain barrier's selective permeability are extremely complex & well suited to their job. The endothelial cells, tight junctions, transporters, astrocytes, and pericytes all work together to ensure that only essential nutrients pass through while blocking harmful substances. But the same properties that protect the brain from harmful agents also make it difficult to treat neurological diseases effectively.

II. MECHANISMS OF NEUROLOGICAL DISEASES

Neurological diseases, especially neurodegenerative disorders are usually the result of a combination of genetic, molecular, and environmental factors. These diseases are marked by progressive damage to neurons, the cells that transmit signals throughout the brain & nervous system. The specific mechanism behind these diseases usually involve disruptions in cellular processes, the clumping of proteins, inflammation & neural degeneration.



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Protein Accumulation & Misfolding - One of the biggest indicators of neurological diseases like, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and Huntington's disease is the clumping up of improperly folded proteins. The shape of a protein has everything to do with its function. Normally, proteins are folded into specific shapes to perform their functions, but in neurological diseases, proteins like amyloid-beta (in Alzheimer's), alpha-synuclein (in Parkinson's), and huntingtin (in Huntington's) become misfolded and clump together into toxic clumps. These protein clumps disrupt cellular function, limit neural communication and in the end lead to neural death.

Neuroinflammation - Neuroinflammation is inflammation in the brain and plays a huge role in many neurological diseases. It's usually caused by the activation of microglia (the brain's resident immune cells). While microglia help protect the brain, in neurodegenerative diseases they can become overactive and release pro-inflammatory cytokines which worsen the neural damage.n conditions like multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer's, neuroinflammation helps with the loss of neurons and neural networks which cause the disease to progress even more.

Mitochondrial Dysfunction - Mitochondria help with ATP (energy) production for their cell. In many neurological diseases though, mitochondrial dysfunction is one of the main factors in neural death. Mitochondrial dysfunction leads to reduced the amount of energy produced, this leads to oxidative stress, and the release of pro-apoptotic factors that then trigger cell death. For example, in Parkinson's disease, defects in the mitochondria help lead to the loss of dopaminergic neurons which cause the motor symptoms characteristic of the disease.

Excitotoxicity - Exotoicity is the process where excessive stimulation of neurons by neurotransmitters like glutamate leads to cell damage and death. Glutamate is extremely important for normal brain function, but when it accumulates in excessive amounts, it can lead to neuronal depolarization & calcium influx. Excitotoxicity is seen in diseases like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Alzheimer's disease, and stroke, where overactivation of glutamate receptors leads to neuronal injury and disease progression.

Disruption to the BBB - In many neurological diseases, the BBB is compromised. The BBB obviously plays a huge role in maintaining stability and normal brain function, but in diseases like multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer's, the BBB becomes more permeable, this allows immune cells, toxins, and inflammatory molecules to infiltrate the brain. This disruption leads to even more neuroinflammation, tissue damage, and increases the disease progression.

Genetic Mutations and Inheritance - In some neurological diseases, genetic mutations play a direct role in the development/formation of the disease. In Huntington's disease, a mutation in the HTT gene leads to the production of an abnormal protein that causes more & more damage to the brain. In familial Alzheimer's disease, mutations in genes like APP, PSEN1, and PSEN2 lead to early-onset Alzheimer's. These genetic mutations often result in the production of toxic proteins or disrupt normal cellular functions, speeding up the disease progression.

III. MECHANISMS OF BBB DYSFUNCTION

In some neurological diseases the BBB becomes compromised, opening up a whole host of problems. This usually leads to dysfunction, dysfunction being a key factor in the progression of these neurological diseases & something that can amplify their severity.

Breakdown of Tight Junctions - The tight junctions between endothelial cells are the main structures that give the BBB its impermeability. When these junctions break down the barrier becomes leaky, allowing harmful substances like toxins, pathogens, and immune cells to enter the brain. This breakdown of tight junctions is usually caused by inflammation or oxidative stress, which can disrupt the proteins that form the tight junctions (claudins, occludins, and JAMs).

Disruption of Astrocytic Support - Astrocytes, the star-shaped glial cells, play a huge role in maintaining the BBB by secreting signaling molecules like vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF). In conditions like Alzheimer's or stroke, changes in astrocyte activity, like their secretion of growth factors for example, can lead to an overexpression of VEGF. This causes the formation of leaky & improperly shaped blood vessels that then help break down the BBB's function even more. When astrocytes can't properly support the endothelial cells, the BBB's selective permeability is lost.

Pericyte Dysfunction - In diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, pericytes go through dysfunction. This causes the loosening of the tight junctions between endothelial cells. This increases the permeability of the BBB, which allows



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harmful substances to enter the brain. Pericyte loss or malfunction causes reduced stability in the BBB and can play a huge role in disease progression

Oxidative Stress and Free Radicals - Oxidative stress which is an imbalance between free radicals and antioxidants, can cause a lot of damage to the endothelial cells that make up the BBB. Free radicals, which are highly reactive molecules, can damage cellular structures, including tight junction proteins. The oxidative stress seen in diseases like Parkinson's disease and stroke helps breakdown the BBB which allows harmful substances like inflammatory molecules or pathogens to enter the brain. This damage to the endothelial cells causes BBB dysfunction & worsens the condition.

Disrupted Endothelial Cell Function - The endothelial cells can go through dysfunction themselves in many neurological diseases. For example, in HIV-associated neurocognitive disorders (HAND), the virus directly damages endothelial cells and limits their ability to form tight junctions. In Alzheimer's disease, amyloid-beta plaques clump up in the blood vessels, this directly affects endothelial cell function and leads to the breakdown of the BBB. The compromised endothelial cells allow for more harmful substances to get through the BBB, this worsens symptoms and accelerated disease progression even more.

Molecular Changes in BBB Transporters - On top of physical disruption, molecular components of the BBB can also be changed during a disease. In conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, the expression of certain transporters on endothelial cells can be altered. For example, transporters responsible for pumping out toxic substances could become less efficient allowing for harmful substances to accumulate in the brain. In Alzheimer's, the limited function of efflux pumps like P-glycoprotein (P-gp) can prevent the removal of amyloid-beta and other toxic proteins, this contributing to the disease's progression.

Hypoxia-Induced BBB Dysfunction - Hypoxia which is a lack of oxygen, is another common feature of a lot of neurological diseases, especially after a stroke or traumatic brain injury. The lack of oxygen stresses out the endothelial cells and leads to the breakdown of tight junctions. Hypoxia can also increase the production of VEGF, which encourages the creation of leaky & weak blood vessels, compromising the BBB even more. This makes the brain more vulnerable to inflammation and other harmful processes.

Current Strategies & their Limitations:

Intrathecal Drug Delivery (Direct Injection into the CSF) - Intrathecal drug delivery involves injecting the medication directly into the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) which surrounds the brain & spinal cord. This bypasses the blood-brain barrier (BBB) completely and delivers drugs directly to the site. This involves a catheter being implanted in the spinal area for surgery, this then allows for drug administration.It's mainly used for chronic conditions where medications need to be delivered consistently & directly to the site.

Diseases Treated:

•Spasticity management (reducing or controlling muscle stiffness and spasms) in conditions like cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis

•Cancers (like leukemia and lymphoma affecting the CNS)

•Chronic Pain or other extremely severe neurological conditions that need long-term drug useLimitations:

•Invasive Procedure - Because this therapy involves surgically placing a catheter, it can come with the risks associated with surgery, this includes things like infection, injury and other complications from the catheter itself.

•Limited drug options - Only specific types of drugs (especially only those soluble in CSF) can be delivered this way & many drugs still don't work effectively through intrathecal delivery.

•Complications from the Catheter - Any surgical procedure carries risks, in this case there is a lot associated with just the catheter, things like blockage, infection or dislodgement could potentially occur.

•The Need for Consistent Treatment - Drug delivery via a catheter is a continuous long-term treatment. This can lead to long-term issues for the patient, like discomfort or the need for regular replacements of the catheter.



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Focused Ultrasound (FUS) with Microbubbles - Ultrasound waves are focused on specific areas of the brain & temporarily open up the BBB. Microbubbles are also injected into the bloodstream to enhance the effect by helping drugs cross the barrier.

Diseases Treated:

•Alzheimer's disease (lowering amyloid-beta plaque)

•Brain tumors and other neurodegenerative diseases

Limitations:

•Temporary BBB Opening - This temporary opening is very short-lived. This means that there's a very small window to deliver the drug before the BBB closes again. This makes it not the best option for continued drug delivery

•Difficulties with the Precision - Targeting specific deep-brain structures is extremely challenging & the ultrasound waves might affect unintended brain regions. This makes it a risky treatment with a lot of potential side effects or unwanted stimulation

•Potential Tissue Damage - If the ultrasound waves are not precisely controlled, the intense energy from them could damage brain tissue or surrounding structures

•Inconsistent Delivery - The success rate of this therapy is pretty inconsistent as it depends on so many factors like patient anatomy and the exact positioning of the ultrasound. This inconsistency makes it unreliable for widespread use.

Convection-Enhanced Delivery (CED) - CED involves placing a catheter directly in the brain through surgery to directly infuse therapeutic agents into brain tissue. This therapy relies heavily on pressure gradients to spread drugs deeper into the brain tissue.

Diseases Treated:

•Brain tumors (glioblastomas for example)

• Parkinson's disease and other neurological conditions using gene therapy

Limitations:

•Invasive Procedure - Because this involves a catheter being directly implanted into the brain which then involves surgery, this therapy has all the risks associated with surgery like infection, tissue damage and other surgical complications.

•Not for Widespread Diseases - CED is super localized & only effective for specific areas of the brain. It's not too useful for treating widespread neurodegenerative diseases or conditions that affect larger regions of the brain.

•Uneven Drug Distribution - The pressure gradients that are used to spread the drug through the brain tissue may not be the same. This can lead to areas of under-treatment or over-treatment & this variability leads to inconsistent results.

Nasal Drug Delivery - Drugs are administered through the nose, where we use the olfactory nerve to bypass the BBB. The idea is that the drugs will directly go to the brain, which could be more effective for conditions that involve CNS.

Diseases Treated:

•Alzheimer's disease (using nasal insulin as a possible treatment)

• Parkinson's disease and other neurodegenerative conditions

Limitations:

•Limited drug options - Only certain small molecules or lipophilic drugs can be delivered properly & effectively through the nasal passage. Large or charged molecules usually can't cross the olfactory nerve effectively.



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•Inconsistent Absorption - The amount of the drug that makes it to the brain varies from person to person. A lot of factors come into play, things like nasal anatomy, congestion, and the drug formulation can affect how much of the drug is actually absorbed.

•Short Duration - The delivery of drugs via the nose is usually short-lived.

IV. INTRODUCTION

To overcome the problem the BBB presents, we need new approaches, ones that don't work around the BBB but with it. This paper explores four highly specialized strategies designed with this goal in mind. Each method takes a different angle on the same problem: how to get medicine into the brain without damaging the BBB.

Genetically Engineered "Trojan Horse" Cells to Carry Drugs Across the BBB

Genetically engineered "Trojan Horse" cells are an innovative and compatible strategy for delivering drugs across the blood-brain barrier. These cells are designed to mimic the body's own mechanisms for crossing the BBB by disguising therapeutic agents within living cells (like monocytes, macrophages, or mesenchymal stem cells.)

1.Modified Monocytes and Stem Cells - Immune or stem cells could be harvested and genetically modified to carry therapeutic agents like small-molecule drugs or siRNA. These engineered cells are then reintroduced into the bloodstream where they move towards inflamed or diseased areas in the brain using chemotactic cues. This strategy would be great in treating diseases like glioblastoma or Alzheimer's where inflammation is a key feature that will help guide the cells to the brain.

2.Crossing the BBB Naturally - Once these engineered cells reach the BBB, they could use natural transport mechanisms (like diapedesis, a process where immune cells squeeze between the endothelial junctions) to their advantage to enter the brain. Since these are the body's own cells, they're not flagged down & they're allowed to pass through undetected where they'll deliver their 'cargo' into the affected areas.

3.Controlled Drug Release - To make sure that the drug is delivered correctly & precisely to where it's needed, these cells could be engineered to release their contents in response to specific stimuli, this can include things like local pH changes, enzymes, or even external triggers like light or ultrasound. This level of control helps reduce the ff-target effects and helps reduce systemic toxicity.

Despite the potential of these solutions, there are real limitations. The process of harvesting and modifying patientderived cells is time-consuming and expensive. Also making sure these engineered cells, especially during circulation are stable in the long-term is extremely challenging. There's also the risk of immune recognition, especially with repeated administration and in some cases, the release of cargo may not be the most efficient or targeted.

However, that being said, the "Trojan Horse" cells are an innovative approach, by using the body's own infrastructure, this strategy offers high specificity and lower toxicity, 2 things most conventional drugs do not offer.

Bioengineered "Virus - Inspired" Nanocarriers

To solve this problem, we can take inspiration from nature, more specifically viruses. Nanocarriers that mimic viral properties could be another potential solution to the problem, these bioengineered particles are small, surface adapted & highly targeted. These qualities could allow them to slip by easily & deliver therapeutic agents directly in the brain. Unlike other drug delivery systems, these virus-inspired nanocarriers don't rely on force or strength, they instead use stealth & specificity.

1.Surface Ligand Functionalization - A key trait in these nanocarriers is their use of surface ligands that copy & mimic viral envelope proteins. These ligands can bind to specific receptors on the surface of endothelial cells, this then triggers receptor-mediated transcytosis and allows the nanocarrier to cross the BBB. For example, ligands targeting transferrin or insulin receptors can guide the nanocarrier across with amazing specificity, this strategy being really similar to the ones viruses use to enter host cells. This technique makes sure that the therapeutic 'cargo' is directed exactly where it is needed, also helping minimize the off-target effects.

2.Capsid-Mimicking Shells - Like viral capsids, the outer shell of these nanocarriers is designed for maximum stability and the most efficient entry into cells. These shells can protect the therapeutic drugs from enzymatic degradation in the



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bloodstream and increase circulation time. They can also be engineered to disassemble once they're actually inside the brain, releasing their 'cargo' in response to stimuli like pH or enzyme activity.

3.Nucleic Acid & Protein Delivery - Unlike a lot of traditional drug delivery systems, these nanocarriers can be used to transport not only small-molecule drugs, but also nucleic acids (like siRNA or mRNA) and functional proteins (therapeutics that are basically impossible to deliver to the BBB currently). This also opens the door for gene therapy and precision treatments.

This virus-inspired approach/solution uses the biological principles that make the BBB so selective to get past it. Although there are still challenges in large-scale production and long-term safety, the advantages & biomimetic intelligence of this strategy make it an extremely promising path.

V. BBB-DISRUPTING FOCUSED LIGHT THERAPY

Instead of trying to sneak past the blood-brain barrier, this strategy temporarily opens it. Focused light therapy, especially when combined with photosensitive nanoparticles or microbubbles lets clinicians reversibly disrupt the BBB at specific regions, allowing drugs to pass through that normally wouldn't stand a chance.

1.Focused Ultrasound (FUS) with Microbubbles - One of the most well-developed methods involves using focusedultrasound combined with intravenously injected microbubbles. When exposed to ultrasound waves, these microbubbles oscillate and create mechanical forces that gently separate the tight junctions of endothelial cells in a localized region. This creates a temporary window in the BBB - long enough for drugs to enter, but short enough for the barrier to reseal afterward.

2.Photothermal Nanoparticles - Another technique uses nanoparticles that absorb near-infrared (NIR) light and convert it into heat. When directed to a target area in the brain and exposed to light, the thermal effect disrupts the endothelial tight junctions just enough to let drug penetration occur. This can also be fine-tuned by controlling the intensity and duration of light exposure which is another advantage as clinicians have a high degree of spatial & temporal control.

3.Advantages in Targeted Delivery - What makes this approach so powerful is its precision. Rather than systematically altering the BBB, these methods allow for localized, non-invasive, and reversible adjustment to the BBB. This means that drugs can reach specific brain regions without affecting the rest of the brain's protective environment.

This strategy takes a completely different approach to BBB penetration focusing more on controlled entry rather than force or stealth. While it does come with risks, like potential tissue overheating or inflammation if not precisely controlled, the ability to physically and temporarily open the BBB makes focused light therapy a unique and promising tool.

Magnetically Guided Nanoparticles

By attaching therapeutic agents to magnetic nanoparticles, clinicians can direct these particles to specific regions of the brain using external magnets, this allows the drugs to be steered directly past the BBB & straight to their targeted region.

1.Magnetic Nanoparticles as Drug Carriers - These are made up of biocompatible materials like iron oxide and coated with polymers to improve stability and avoid immune detection. The drugs are either embedded inside or chemically linked to the nanoparticle's surface. Once injected into the bloodstream, an external magnetic field could be used to guide the particles across the BBB toward a diseased brain region.

2.Magnetic Field-Assisted BBB Disruption - In some cases, these particles aren't just passive carriers. When exposed to alternating magnetic fields, some nanoparticles can generate localized heat (through magnetic hyperthermia), this then mildly disrupts the BBB in a controlled fashion. This added function enhances drug penetration and improves the therapeutic effects without causing too much change or damage to the BBB in the process.

3.Advantages in Accuracy and Dosage Control - Because the particles can be concentrated in a specific region, drugs must be given in very small doses to prevent off-target effects & improve safety. This precision is extremely valuable when dealing with toxic or highly potent therapeutics—like chemotherapy agents or gene-editing tools.



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There are still challenges like particle clearance, long-term toxicity, and the strength and penetration of magnetic fields in human tissue that need to be fine-tuned, but the concept of a remotely controlled, magnetically directed drug delivery is still a promising path.

VI. CONCLUSION

The blood-brain barrier, while crucial for protecting the brain, stands as one of the biggest obstacles in treating neurological diseases. Current treatments, although somewhat effective, still fall short when it comes to delivering drugs directly and efficiently into the brain. That's why we focused on exploring more innovative and experimental strategies. Whether it's hijacking natural transport systems with Trojan horse cells, mimicking viruses with nanocarriers, using focused light to temporarily loosen the barrier, or guiding drugs with magnetic fields—each of these methods represents a shift in how we approach brain-targeted therapy. Instead of trying to work around the barrier, these ideas aim to directly engage and bypass it in smarter, more controlled ways. If developed correctly, they could mark a major turning point in how we treat some of the most difficult brain conditions.

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