Radioligand Therapy: Is Capacity, Not Efficacy, Limiting Patient Access?

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 27 August 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

> Radioligand therapy (RLT) represents a significant advancement in targeted cancer treatment, leveraging tumor-specific ligands to deliver cytotoxic radiation directly to malignant cells. While two agents have gained regulatory approval and over 400 clinical trials are underway, a recent review highlights that the primary barrier to wider adoption and patient access may not be a lack of clinical evidence, but rather limitations in global capacity and infrastructure.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: The primary limitation for broader radioligand therapy (RLT) access is infrastructure and workforce capacity, not the accumulating clinical evidence.
- The Data: Over 400 clinical trials are exploring novel RLT targets, radionuclides, and combination regimens across various malignancies, indicating robust research activity.
- The Action: Expanding RLT access requires significant investment in infrastructure, workforce training, and international collaboration to overcome current global disparities.

Targeted Radioligand Therapy: An Overview

Radioligand therapy (RLT) is a precision oncology approach that combines a tumor-targeting ligand with a therapeutic radionuclide. This radiopharmaceutical is designed to selectively bind to specific cancer-associated targets, delivering a localized dose of cytotoxic radiation directly to tumor cells. This mechanism aims to maximize therapeutic effect on malignant cells while minimizing radiation exposure to surrounding healthy tissues. The targeted nature of RLT distinguishes it from conventional radiation therapies, offering a more precise treatment option for certain cancers 1.

Current Landscape of Approved RLT Agents

As of the review's publication, two radioligand therapy agents have received regulatory approval for specific cancer indications. [^{177}Lu]Lu-DOTA-TATE (Lutathera®) is approved for the treatment of advanced gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors (GEP-NETs). For metastatic castration-resistant prostate cancer (mCRPC), [^{177}Lu]Lu-PSMA-617 (Pluvicto®) has gained approval. These approvals underscore the clinical utility and efficacy demonstrated by RLT in these challenging cancer types. Beyond these approved agents, the field is rapidly expanding, with more than 400 clinical trials registered by July 2025. These trials are investigating novel molecular targets, such as FAP (fibroblast activation protein), CAIX (carbonic anhydrase IX), and GRPR (gastrin-releasing peptide receptor), as well as exploring alternative radionuclides and combination regimens across a broad spectrum of solid and hematologic malignancies 1.

Design Principles and Mechanisms of Action

The effectiveness of RLT relies on several key design principles. The ligand component must exhibit high affinity and specificity for a target antigen overexpressed on cancer cells, ensuring precise delivery of the radionuclide. The radionuclide itself must possess suitable decay characteristics, typically emitting beta particles for therapeutic effect, with a half-life that allows for manufacturing, distribution, and patient administration. Once the radiopharmaceutical binds to its target, the emitted radiation induces DNA damage and cell death in the tumor cells. The choice of radionuclide and ligand, along with the linker chemistry, are critical factors influencing the biodistribution, tumor uptake, and therapeutic efficacy of the RLT agent 1.

Challenges and Limitations in RLT Implementation

Despite the promising clinical evidence, several challenges impede the widespread adoption and optimal use of RLT. These include issues related to fixed dosing regimens, which may not account for individual patient variability in tumor burden or pharmacokinetics. The development of resistance mechanisms in some patients, leading to reduced treatment efficacy over time, is another significant concern. Managing potential toxicities, although generally favorable compared to conventional systemic therapies, requires careful patient monitoring. Furthermore, variability in patient selection criteria and response assessment methodologies across different centers can impact treatment outcomes and data interpretation 1.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The review highlights that while the clinical evidence for RLT continues to grow, global disparities in access and availability are a major limiting factor. This suggests that the bottleneck for broader patient benefit is often related to practical implementation rather than a lack of therapeutic potential. Addressing these disparities will require substantial investment in infrastructure, including specialized nuclear medicine facilities, radiopharmacies, and advanced imaging equipment. Furthermore, expanding the skilled workforce—comprising nuclear medicine physicians, medical physicists, radiochemists, and specialized nurses—is crucial. International collaboration can facilitate knowledge transfer, standardize protocols, and optimize resource allocation, ultimately expanding access to these life-extending therapies 1.

Why this matters for clinical practice today

For clinicians, the insights from this review underscore a critical tension: the rapid scientific advancement of radioligand therapies is outpacing the healthcare system's capacity to deliver them. While the efficacy of approved RLTs for specific neuroendocrine tumors and prostate cancer is clear, and the pipeline of new agents is robust, many patients who could benefit may not have access due to logistical and infrastructural hurdles. This means that even with compelling clinical data, the practical realities of treatment delivery—from radionuclide production and distribution to specialized facility availability and trained personnel—are dictating who receives these therapies. Clinicians should be aware that advocating for increased institutional investment in nuclear medicine infrastructure and workforce development is as vital as staying abreast of the latest clinical trial results to ensure these innovative treatments reach more patients.

Addressing Limitations and Charting Next Steps

The authors identify several areas for continued research and development. Optimizing radiopharmaceutical design, for instance, could lead to agents with improved tumor targeting, reduced off-target toxicity, and enhanced therapeutic ratios. Exploring alternative radionuclides with different decay characteristics might expand the range of treatable tumors or improve efficacy in specific settings. Further research into combination regimens, integrating RLT with other modalities like chemotherapy, external beam radiation, or immunotherapy, holds promise for synergistic effects. Ultimately, realizing the full potential of RLT as a leading treatment strategy in modern oncology will depend on a concerted effort to overcome both clinical and logistical challenges through ongoing research and strategic investment 1.

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