Monoclonal Antibodies in Clinical Practice: Promise, Precision, and Persistent Challenges – an editorial

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The therapeutic landscape of modern medicine has been transformed by the advent of Monoclonal antibody therapies. Since the approval of muromonab-CD3 in 1986, monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) have evolved from experimental immunological tools into central pillars of treatment across oncology, autoimmune disease, infectious diseases, and beyond. Their clinical success reflects a broader shift towards targeted and precision medicine. Yet, alongside their undeniable benefits, important limitations persist.

The principal advantage of monoclonal antibodies lies in their specificity. Engineered to recognise defined antigens, they permit selective modulation of disease pathways. In oncology, agents such as Trastuzumab have revolutionised the treatment of HER2-positive breast cancer by targeting tumour-specific receptors, substantially improving survival[1]. Similarly, immune checkpoint inhibitors, including Nivolumab, have reshaped the management of advanced malignancies by restoring anti-tumour immune responses[2]. In autoimmune conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and inflammatory bowel disease, tumour necrosis factor (TNF) inhibitors have mitigated inflammation and prevented structural damage[3].

Beyond efficacy, monoclonal antibodies often offer improved tolerability compared with traditional cytotoxic agents. Their mechanism-driven design reduces off-target toxicity, and in many cases enables durable disease control. During the COVID-19 pandemic, neutralising monoclonal antibodies provided early therapeutic options against SARS-CoV-2, highlighting their adaptability in emerging infectious threats[4].

However, the expansion of mAb therapy has exposed substantial challenges. Foremost among these is cost. The development and manufacturing of biologics are complex and resource-intensive, rendering monoclonal antibodies among the most expensive therapeutics worldwide. Limited access in low- and middle-income countries exacerbates global health inequities[5]. Although biosimilars offer promise for cost reduction, regulatory and market barriers remain.

Immunogenicity is another concern. Despite humanisation strategies, anti-drug antibodies can develop, reducing efficacy and occasionally provoking hypersensitivity reactions[6]. Furthermore, immune checkpoint inhibitors, while transformative, may precipitate immune-related adverse events affecting the skin, gut, endocrine organs, and myocardium—complications that can be severe and require long-term immunosuppression[7].

Resistance mechanisms also undermine sustained benefit. Tumour heterogeneity, antigen loss, and pathway redundancy may diminish response over time. In infectious diseases, viral mutations can render neutralising antibodies less effective, as observed with emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants[8]. Thus, biological precision does not equate to permanence.

Logistical limitations further complicate widespread use. Most monoclonal antibodies require parenteral administration and cold-chain storage, constraining their deployment in resource-limited settings. Additionally, long half-lives may complicate management of adverse effects.

Ethical considerations accompany scientific progress. As therapeutic options proliferate, clinicians must balance marginal survival benefits against financial toxicity and quality-of-life implications. The sustainability of healthcare systems is increasingly questioned as biologic expenditures rise.

Nonetheless, innovation continues. Advances in antibody–drug conjugates, bispecific antibodies, and Fc engineering are expanding therapeutic horizons while attempting to optimise efficacy and safety. The development of biosimilars signals a step towards improved accessibility, though vigilance in pharmacovigilance and regulatory oversight remains essential.

Monoclonal antibodies exemplify the triumph of translational immunology. They offer unprecedented specificity and have altered the natural history of diseases once deemed intractable. Yet, their integration into routine clinical practice demands careful consideration of cost, equity, adverse effects, and long-term sustainability. As medicine advances deeper into the era of biological therapeutics, the challenge will not merely be to develop more antibodies, but to deploy them judiciously, equitably, and responsibly.

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Received: 23 Feb 2026
Published Online: 27 Feb 2026
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18806043

Volume: 9, Number: 1, Page: 1-1
e-ISSN: 2789-5912
ISSN: 2617-0817

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