Pediatric drug development: Essential insights for success

This article describes some of the key considerations in establishing a global pediatric drug development strategy, including changes in regulatory requirements and clinical study design, and includes case studies and examples.

Keywords – pediatric drug development, strategy, precedent, study design

Introduction
Pediatric drug development in the US and EU is subject to the continual evolution in local, regional, and global regulatory requirements and guidelines. While these changes may take time to implement, it is paramount that regulatory professionals routinely monitor regulatory changes and shifts in precedent to ensure the development of robust strategies that include risk and mitigation plans for pediatric drug development. Failure to do so can lead to delays in clinical study conduct, compliance issues, and missed opportunities for new and enhanced pediatric treatment options.

Monitoring changes in the regulatory environment

Regulations and guidance
There were several important proposed changes in the EU and US regulatory environments during 2023, each of which could affect pediatric drug development programs and warrants monitoring for finalization and implementation of specific regulations.

In April 2023, the European Commission published a proposal to reshape the regulation of the EU pharmaceutical sector by addressing inequities around new medicines, including their availability to patients, drug pricing, transparency related to public funding of drug development, environmental sustainability, drug shortages, and global competitiveness. The proposal amends and replaces the existing EU directive and regulation and the regulation of pediatric and orphan drugs and includes recommendations for:

- Revision of data protection periods, exclusivity, and incentives;
- The introduction of a new pediatric investigation plan that will evolve and become more defined as more evidence becomes available; and
- Simplifying the EMA’s delegate structures by discontinuing the orphan, pediatric, and advanced therapy medicinal products committees and retaining just two scientific committees – the Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use, for approving human medicines, and the Pharmacovigilance Risk Assessment Committee, for assessing human safety data.
In May 2023, the FDA issued two important draft guidance documents addressing the regulatory and scientific considerations in pediatric drug development. The documents are intended to clarify the agency’s approach to requirements and incentives related to drug development for this population, though obtaining pediatric exclusivity could become more challenging.

The draft guidance on regulatory considerations describes the process for qualifying for pediatric exclusivity under the Best Pharmaceuticals for Children Act (BPCA), including the intent to limit the scope of studies eligible for pediatric market exclusivity under the BPCA. Historically, the FDA has periodically granted pediatric market exclusivity to sponsors conducting studies already required under the Pediatric Research Equity Act (PREA), even if no new indications were expected in a pediatric population. The guidance notes that written requests from the agency would be reserved only for sponsors who need to conduct additional studies beyond PREA requirements to demonstrate a drug’s health benefits in the pediatric population. Thus, under the final document, the FDA will likely not issue written requests for drugs for studies or planned studies required under the PREA.

The draft guidance on scientific considerations clarifies the clinical, scientific, and ethical issues related to the development of pediatric drugs and biologics under the BPCA and PREA, specifically regarding formulation development, clinical and nonclinical information, safety information, and the conditions under which sponsors may extrapolate pediatric data from studies of drugs intended for adult use.

End points and data acceptability

The EMA and FDA share many similarities in their evaluation processes, but there can be instances in which they may not accept the same end points and outcomes. This divergence can occur because of differences between EU and US regulatory priorities, patient populations, and healthcare systems. For example, the EMA might be more open to accepting certain clinical end points or surrogate markers as valid indicators of a drug’s efficacy, especially in cases in which there is a significant unmet medical need or the benefits outweigh the risks for the European patient population.

One such example was the June 2021 expanded indication authorization in the EU for Aubagio (teriflunomide) as a first-line treatment for relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) in patients aged 10 to 17 years. The EU approval came after the FDA had issued the company a complete response letter for the same patient population. The FDA deemed the submitted data were not sufficient for obtaining approval of an indication in the pediatric population, and the Aubagio label was updated in 2021 to include safety data from the pediatric clinical study program. Specifically, Subsection 5.11 of the label’s Warnings and Precautions section was revised to include a warning for pancreatitis in pediatric patients, and Subsection 8.4 of the Use in Specific Populations section was revised to reflect that the drug’s safety and effectiveness had not been demonstrated in the clinical study evaluating pediatric patients with RRMS.

Sponsors might consider using the EMA-FDA parallel scientific advice program to ensure potential strategies align with the preferences of the two agencies.

Such differences between the EU and US underscore the importance of carefully navigating the regulatory requirements and understanding the regulatory flexibility of the respective authorities to ensure successful drug approval in both places. Sponsors should engage with all relevant agencies early in the drug development phase to proactively identify and address potential problems. They might consider using the EMA-FDA parallel scientific advice program to ensure potential strategies align with the preferences of the two agencies. In general, staying informed and adapting to regulatory
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Changes is integral to any pediatric drug development program.

**Rare diseases with simultaneous approval in adults**

A company can request the FDA assign a pediatric drug any of the following designations, which could facilitate its development and have a positive impact on final product approval:

- **Orphan drug**, introduced in the Orphan Drug Act of 1983;\(^1\)
- **Fast track**, introduced in the Food and Drug Administration Modernization Act;\(^2\)
- **Regenerative medicine advanced therapy (RMAT)**, introduced in the 21st Century Cures Act;\(^3\) and
- **Rare pediatric disease (RPD)**, introduced in the Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act.\(^4\)

As of November 2023, the FDA has approved several products for rare diseases with indications for both pediatric and adult patients. The following approvals are examples of how FDA designations had a positive effect, facilitating the development and path to approval:

- **Vyjuvek (beremagene geperpavec-svdt)**, approved on 19 May 2023,\(^5\) was granted designations of orphan drug, fast track, RMAT, and RPD. The biologics license application (BLA) received priority review, and the manufacturer, Krystal Biotech, received a priority review voucher (PRV) upon approval. The approval was the first for a topical gene therapy for treating epidermolysis bullosa in patients six months or older.\(^6\)
- **Skyclarys (omaveloxolone)**, approved on 28 February 2023,\(^7\) was granted designations of orphan drug, fast track, and RPD. The new drug application (NDA) received priority review, and the manufacturer, Reata Pharmaceuticals, received a PRV upon approval. The approval was the first for treating Friedreich's ataxia in patients aged 16 years or older.\(^8\)
- **Veopoz (pozelimab-bbfg)** was approved on 18 August 2023 for treating CHAPLE disease in patients one year old or older.\(^9\) It was granted designations of orphan drug, fast track, and RPD. The NDA received priority review, and the manufacturer, Regeneron, received a PRV upon approval.
- **Daybue (trofinetide)** was approved on 10 March 2023\(^10\) for treating Rett syndrome in adults and pediatric patients aged two years or older. It was granted designations of orphan drug, fast track, and RPD. The NDA received priority review, and the manufacturer, Acadia Pharmaceuticals, received a PRV upon approval.
- **Joenja (leniolisib)** was approved on 24 March 2023\(^11\) for treating activated phosphoinositide 3-kinase delta syndrome in adults and pediatric patients 12 years or older. It was granted designations of orphan drug and RPD. The NDA received priority review, and the manufacturer, Pharming Technologies, received a PRV upon approval.

**Understanding the benefits, criteria, and timing for the various avenues provided by the FDA is critical to the overall drug development program and corporate objectives.**

Receiving an RPD designation and the subsequent receipt of a PRV upon approval is a lucrative benefit. The company can use the PRV in future NDA or BLA submissions to facilitate a priority review rather than the standard review, reducing the review from 10 months to six months. A PRV can also be sold to another company – one company recently sold its PRV for \$102 million.\(^12\) Understanding the benefits, criteria, and timing for the various avenues provided by the FDA is critical to the overall drug development program and corporate objectives.
Clinical study design

There are numerous challenges in designing a clinical study (or studies) for approving a drug in the pediatric population, especially for products that have already been approved. A hypothetical example would be an investigational product with a potential topical analgesic effect (based on its mechanism of action). In this example, the following considerations would need to be addressed:

- **The effects of administration route and duration of treatment.** A locally or topically treated indication will likely require short-term treatment (e.g., for simple surgical procedures or local infections). Long-term conditions would more likely require a systemic treatment. These short- and long-term considerations should have a role in defining and justifying an appropriate patient population for inclusion in the study, bearing in mind that the planned label should always address whether the new therapy will meet an unmet therapeutic need in this target population. When developing drugs for children, it is important to strike a balance between limiting development to an older population and expanding the scope of the study to include all ages, despite the challenges of doing so. Early discussion with the regulatory agency about approaches to age inclusivity is recommended.

- **Appropriate outcome measures in different age ranges.** In the current example, the study design for a locally acting analgesic in children poses specific problems, such as which endpoints would be appropriate if younger children were included in the patient population. Established adult outcome measures, such as the visual analog or Likert scales, are not applicable in the pediatric setting. Instead, an innovative approach would be required, such as involving healthcare providers in reporting pediatric patient outcomes by, for example, noting their patients’ behavioral or even autonomic reactions to pain.

- **Disease progression patterns.** For recurrent and multiple lesions (e.g., in epidermolysis bullosa), it would be important to ensure that patients’ current standard-of-care and other adjunctive treatments, such as antiseptics or those for wound healing, are not interrupted. This can be addressed by isolating treatment with the study drug/topical analgesic to an established number of predefined target lesions or predefined area(s) of the body that are tracked for comparison with untreated lesions or body areas. One should also consider whether comparative data for other established analgesics might be required in the study. Pediatric-specific problems will also have to be addressed, for example, compliance with often burdensome wound management or nonspecific reporting of disease symptoms.

**When developing drugs for children, it is important balance limiting development to an older population and expanding the scope of the study to include all ages.**

In conclusion, pediatric studies will require some specific considerations in addition to the aspects that usually have to be taken into account for adult-only trials.

**Age-appropriate formulations**

Another important aspect of pediatric drug development is the establishment of age-appropriate formulations for the age ranges in which the product will be used. Both US and EU regulations specify that this can be imposed.³,²¹

It is important to start such considerations early. This would include a critical review of all excipients planned for use in the pediatric formulations to assess their possible risks if included. Only essential excipients should be included and, where warranted, replaced with those
that have better-established safety profiles in children. These products could include dyes, sweeteners, stabilizers, parabens, alcohol, and flavorings. Requirements for excipients in pediatric drug development are much stricter than in other regulated industries, for example, those in prepared foods. It should be noted that considerations around excipients in the pediatric setting may also be relevant to adult formulations of the same drug and that a formulation appropriate for children might also be preferable for adults.

Tablet size should be age appropriate so that younger children can easily and safely swallow the tablet and to ensure accurate dosing. Other formulation options – such as microtablets, granules, or liquids – that will ensure ease and safety of swallowing and accurate dosing may also need to be considered. Acceptability of the formulation will require supporting data in the target population, mainly as a secondary objective in the clinical study. There may be a need for more than one additional formulation. This could include having smaller tablet sizes or strengths for more accurate dosing and/or to allow easier swallowing in smaller children or microgranules for sprinkling on food or adding to liquid formulations for infants. The microgranular formulation would also need proof of appropriate bioavailability.

Conclusion
Pediatric drug development is complex and requires multifaceted strategic considerations to achieve success. Early engagement with health authorities is a strategic imperative and requires internal collaboration to ensure alignment on selecting the end point(s), the age ranges for the study groups, and the formulation needs of pediatric patients while also achieving the company goals. This strategy encompasses an understanding of the current and evolving global regulatory requirements and incentives and an assessment of current precedent to ensure success.

Abbreviations
BLA, biologics license application; BPCA, Best Pharmaceuticals for Children Act; EMA, European Medicines Agency; FDA, Food and Drug Administration [US]; NDA, new drug application; PREA, Pediatric Research Equity Act; PRV, priority review voucher; RMAT, regenerative medicine advanced therapy; RPD, rare pediatric disease.

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Citation

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