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Clayton A. Dehn *

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Review Article

Advancing FDA Guidance on Weight Management Products: Prioritizing Body Composition in Obesity Therapies

Clayton A. Dehn *

Evolution Research Group (ERG), NJ, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Clayton A. Dehn, Executive Vice President – Scientific Services & Therapeutic Area Lead – Metabolism & Endocrinology, Evolution Research Group (ERG), 430 Mountain Avenue Suite 302 New Providence, NJ 07974, USA.

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of obesity treatment necessitates updates to FDA guidance on weight management products. Current regulatory frameworks, primarily focused on overall weight reduction, fall short in addressing the complexities of modern pharmacologic approaches, particularly concerning lean muscle preservation. Newer therapies, such as incretin-based drugs, have achieved unprecedented efficacy, but significant loss of lean muscle mass remains a critical issue. This article advocates for the incorporation of body composition metrics as primary endpoints in clinical trials, emphasizing the importance of skeletal muscle preservation alongside fat reduction. Advanced imaging techniques and biomarkers are proposed as tools to more accurately assess therapeutic outcomes. Public-private partnerships are highlighted as key players in driving the validation and adoption of these new metrics, ultimately leading to more comprehensive and effective obesity treatments that align with modern understandings of metabolic health and long-term patient outcomes.

Key words: obesity treatment; FDA guidance; body composition; lean muscle preservation; weight management; regulatory framework; incretin therapies; pharmacologic approaches

Introduction

Pharmacologic approaches to weight control have a long and complex history, marked by a series of advances and setbacks. Early attempts, such as the use of amphetamines in the mid-20th century, were eventually overshadowed by safety concerns, including addiction and cardiovascular risks [1]. The 1990s saw the introduction of drugs like fenfluramine and phentermine, commonly known as Fen-Phen, which were later withdrawn from the market due to associations with valvular heart disease [2]. In the early 2000s, orlistat emerged as a lipase inhibitor that reduced fat absorption, but its modest efficacy and gastrointestinal side effects limited its widespread adoption [3]. These historical challenges highlight the necessity for updating regulatory frameworks to keep pace with advancements in obesity treatments.

The introduction of liraglutide (Saxenda) in 2014, a GLP-1 receptor agonist initially developed for diabetes management, marked a significant step forward in pharmacologic weight control. Saxenda demonstrated more substantial and sustained weight loss compared to previous agents [4]. However, while Saxenda and similar therapies represented progress, the field remained limited by the moderate efficacy and side effects of available treatments [5].

The landscape of obesity treatment has shifted dramatically with the advent of newer agents such as semaglutide (Wegovy) and tirzepatide (Zepbound). These incretin therapies have achieved levels of efficacy that were previously unattainable with pharmacologic approaches, with patients experiencing an average loss of 15% or more of their body weight [6]. As a result, the global market for weight loss drugs continues to revise upward and is now projected to reach $150 billion by the year 2033 [7]. This unprecedented momentum represents a substantial opportunity for pharmaceutical companies to innovate and capture a share of this expanding market.

Evolving Needs in Weight Management: Addressing Lean Muscle Preservation

Despite the remarkable progress, these recently approved weight loss agents are not without their challenges. Studies suggest that approximately 25-35% of the total weight loss associated with these newer therapies may come from lean muscle mass [8]. While reducing fat is essential, emerging evidence suggests that effective chronic weight management should also focus on overall body composition improvements—reducing adiposity, achieving healthier fat distribution, and maintaining or improving lean muscle mass [9].

The unintentional depletion of lean muscle can have serious health implications, including decreased physical strength, increased risk of

falls, overall frailty, and a reduction in energy expenditure and calorie-burning potential [10]. Moreover, even a single cycle of weight loss and regain is associated with increased risks of cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, exacerbation of sarcopenia, and greater difficulty in achieving long-term weight management [11]. These consequences could undermine the overall health benefits of weight reduction, underscoring the need for innovative approaches that not only reduce fat but also consider the impact on overall body composition and long-term metabolic health.

To address these challenges, several investigational therapies, including muscle-sparing or enhancing agents such as apelin, taldefgrobep alfa, bimagrumab, trevogrumab, and garetosmab, are being developed [12]-[16]. These agents represent a significant advancement in addressing the limitations of current pharmacologic strategies for obesity management. For these improved therapies to reach patients, the FDA's criteria for evaluating weight management products must evolve to include endpoints that assess not only the quantity but also the quality of weight loss.

Current FDA Guidance and Its Limitations

The FDA Guidance for Industry on Developing Products for Weight Management, last revised in 2007, has served as a foundational document for the approval and development of anti-obesity therapies [17]. Appropriate for that time, the guidance provided essential benchmarks, including the minimum threshold requiring that at least 35% of subjects in the active group lose at least 5% of baseline body weight. However, this threshold now appears modest compared to the outcomes achieved by recently approved therapies, which often result in significantly greater weight reduction [6]. The efficacy standards established when more modest weight loss was the norm may no longer fully address the capabilities of these newer therapies.

Although the guidance emphasizes that safety assessments should ensure weight loss is primarily due to fat reduction rather than lean mass loss, this approach is increasingly inadequate for the current state of drug development [18]. As newer therapies achieve more substantial weight loss, the risk of disproportionately reducing muscle tissue rather than fat becomes a critical concern—one that existing standards do not sufficiently address [19]. Moreover, relying solely on body weight as the primary endpoint may obscure important efficacy signals, particularly in muscle-stimulating therapies. This highlights the urgent need to update the regulatory framework to include more nuanced measures that better reflect changes in fat mass and muscle mass, rather than focusing exclusively on overall weight loss.

Amidst the rapid innovation and significant advancements in anti-obesity treatments and therapeutic strategies, it has become increasingly clear that the current guidance may no longer fully address the complexities of modern obesity treatments [20]. Despite these evolving needs, there is no indication that a revised regulatory pathway is forthcoming, highlighting a critical gap in the current regulatory approach. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that both the safety and efficacy of new treatments are accurately evaluated, ultimately supporting better health outcomes for patients.

Proposed Considerations for FDA Guidance

As the landscape of obesity treatment evolves, it is imperative for the FDA to consider incorporating body composition as a critical endpoint in the evaluation of weight management products. Specifically, the retention of skeletal muscle mass could be regarded as a primary efficacy endpoint in clinical trials. Advanced imaging technologies such as Dual-Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) are available and could provide accurate assessments of changes in muscle mass and fat distribution [21]. By integrating these techniques, a more nuanced understanding of how new therapies affect body composition could be achieved.

In addition to the primary focus on weight loss, advancing body composition metrics as secondary endpoints would offer deeper insights into treatment effectiveness. Metrics such as visceral fat reduction and lean muscle conservation could provide a more comprehensive view of therapeutic outcomes [22]. Techniques like Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis (BIA) and 3D optical imaging, which are scalable for real-world clinical settings, might facilitate comprehensive patient monitoring and contribute to a more thorough evaluation of these outcomes [23].

Furthermore, other biomarkers, including circulating markers, could provide meaningful and relevant information about the physiological impacts of weight management therapies [24]. These biomarkers could complement body composition assessments by offering additional insights into metabolic changes and overall health status.

Current benchmarks that prioritize achieving a 5% reduction in body weight might also be expanded to reflect improvements in body composition. This could include maintaining or increasing muscle mass while reducing fat mass, particularly visceral fat, which is known to carry significant metabolic risks [25]. By considering these additional factors, efficacy benchmarks could be redefined to better align with modern understandings of health and obesity management.

Moreover, the development and approval of combination therapies that address both weight loss and muscle preservation should be encouraged. Updated guidance outlining clear pathways for the approval of such multi-modal treatments could foster innovation and lead to more comprehensive solutions for patients struggling with obesity [26], [27].

Leveraging the FDA Biomarker Qualification Program and Public-Private Partnerships for Advancing Body Composition Metrics

The FDA Biomarker Qualification Program plays a pivotal role in the development and validation of biomarkers that can be used as endpoints in drug development and regulatory decision-making. This program provides a formal process through which biomarkers can be evaluated and qualified for specific uses in clinical trials, including those that may serve as endpoints for drug registration [28]. The process involves rigorous scientific assessment, and once a biomarker is qualified, it can be used across multiple drug development programs, reducing redundancy and accelerating innovation [29].

Qualifying endpoints that reflect changes in body composition, such as skeletal muscle mass and visceral fat, is critical for the approval of weight management therapies. These endpoints provide a closer inspection of therapeutic effects, revealing nuances that simple reductions in body weight might obscure [30]. For instance, a therapy that effectively reduces adiposity while preserving or even increasing muscle mass might result in less impressive changes to overall body weight. In such cases, relying solely on body weight as a metric could lead to misinterpretation of the therapy's efficacy, potentially undervaluing treatments that offer substantial health benefits by improving body composition [31]. Incorporating these qualified biomarkers into the regulatory framework ensures a more accurate assessment of new obesity treatments, focusing not only on weight reduction but also on the preservation and enhancement of muscle mass, which is crucial for overall health and the prevention of conditions like sarcopenia [32].

The Role of Public-Private Partnerships in Biomarker Qualification

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) offer an effective platform for advancing the development and qualification of biomarkers, including

those relevant to chronic weight management, obesity, and body composition. These collaborations bring together diverse stakeholders from academia, industry, government agencies, and patient advocacy groups to work towards shared goals in advancing healthcare innovation [33].

One of the critical roles that PPPs can play is in facilitating collaborative research and data sharing. By pooling resources and data from multiple organizations, PPPs can significantly accelerate the validation of new biomarkers for skeletal muscle preservation and body composition. This collaborative approach enables large-scale clinical trials, meta-analyses, and the generation of real-world evidence, all aimed at demonstrating the clinical significance and utility of these biomarkers [34]. By focusing on detailed body composition metrics rather than just overall weight loss, these efforts ensure that the true health benefits of a therapy are recognized and not obscured by an unchanged or minimally changed body weight [35]. This nuanced understanding is essential for accurately evaluating the effectiveness of obesity treatments [36].

In addition to research and data sharing, PPPs play a vital role in engaging with regulatory bodies such as the FDA. Consortia formed within these partnerships can serve as a unified voice to advocate for the inclusion of new biomarkers and body composition metrics in regulatory guidance. By presenting comprehensive, high-quality evidence generated through collaboration, these groups can more effectively influence regulatory decision-making [37]. This engagement is crucial for ensuring that new biomarkers are recognized and accepted as valid endpoints in clinical trials [38].

Furthermore, PPPs are instrumental in the development and promotion of best practices and standards for the use of body composition metrics in clinical trials. Establishing standardized methods for measuring skeletal muscle mass, visceral fat, and other relevant endpoints is essential for ensuring consistency and reliability across studies [39]. These standards are crucial for the broad adoption of new biomarkers in both clinical and regulatory settings. By fostering uniformity in measurement and evaluation, PPPs contribute to a more nuanced and accurate assessment of therapeutic interventions, enabling a better understanding of their impact on patient health [40].

Public-private partnerships also play a key role in educating stakeholders—including clinicians, researchers, and policymakers—on the importance of body composition in obesity management. Outreach efforts by PPPs might include workshops, conferences, and publications that disseminate best practices and raise awareness about the need for regulatory reform [41]. Educating these groups is vital for fostering an environment where new biomarkers are understood, accepted, and effectively implemented in clinical practice. This educational component helps reduce the risk of misinterpreting therapeutic outcomes and supports the adoption of more comprehensive evaluation criteria in obesity treatment [42].

Through the collaboration and synergy provided by PPPs, the biomarker qualification process can be streamlined, leading to the establishment of more robust and clinically meaningful endpoints in obesity treatment. These efforts can ultimately result in the development of therapies that not only promote weight loss but also ensure the preservation or enhancement of muscle mass, thereby improving overall patient health outcomes [43]. By focusing on the quality of weight loss—rather than just the quantity—these innovations can better address the complexities of obesity management and enhance the precision of therapeutic evaluations [44].

Conclusion

The need to update the FDA's guidance on weight management products is clear. Incorporating endpoints that assess skeletal muscle preservation and advanced body composition metrics will ensure that new therapies not only reduce weight but also improve overall health and quality of life for patients [45]. While a revised regulatory pathway is not known to be forthcoming, the evolving landscape of obesity treatment strongly suggests that such a revision is necessary [46].

To address this critical need, we call on industry stakeholders, healthcare professionals, and researchers to actively engage with the FDA and other regulatory bodies. By advocating for the integration of body composition metrics into clinical trial endpoints, we can collectively drive the evolution of obesity treatment standards [47]. Collaboration through public-private partnerships is essential to accelerate the development and validation of these biomarkers, ensuring that they are widely adopted and recognized in both clinical and regulatory settings [48].

Now is the time to push for these advancements. By working together, we can help shape a regulatory framework that supports the development of innovative, effective, and comprehensive obesity treatments—ultimately leading to better long-term metabolic health outcomes for millions of patients [49].

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Conflict of Interest

- FDA - Food and Drug Administration
- GLP-1 - Glucagon-Like Peptide-1
- MRI - Magnetic Resonance Imaging
- DXA - Dual-Energy X-ray Absorptiometry
- BIA - Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis
- PPP - Public-Private Partnership

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