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Single-Cell Transcriptomics in Developmental Biology: Bridging Cellular Heterogeneity and Disease Mechanisms

Ashu Nayak[1], Namrata Mishra[2]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of CS & IT, Kalinga University, Raipur, India.
Email: ku.ashunayak@kalingauniversity.ac.in
[2]Department Of Electrical And Electronics Engineering, Kalinga University, Raipur, India.
Email: namrata.mishra@kalingauniversity.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

ScRNA-seq is a promise to discover cellular heterogeneity and dynamism during development by being a disruptive technology. Being able to capture gene expression on a single-cell scale, it prevents the weaknesses of bulk transcriptomics and has the benefits of identifying rare subpopulations, lineage dynamics, and control networks. Other recent technological and computational solutions have enabled the use of scRNA-seq to profile and integrate with spatial and multi-omics data in large scales to increase its application in the mapping of embryogenesis, organogenesis and stem cell differentiation. Experiences of these researches are being used more and more to learn about disease mechanisms such as congenital disease, cancer, neurodegradation, and immune dysregulation. Although there are obstacles to artificial intelligence clinical relevance, including sparsity of data, technical variability and interpretability, the continued advancement of artificial intelligence, integrative modeling and translational pipelines is increasing clinical relevance. Single-cell transcriptomics is proving to be a foundation of precise medicine and tissue regenerative biology by connecting fundamental developmental events to the pathological states.

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of how a single fertilized cell can produce the enormous diversity of specialized forms of cells which make up tissues and organs has long been addressed by developmental biology. Initial studies were primarily based on descriptive embryology, morphological studies, and experiments on the lineage of model organisms (Drosophila, zebrafish, mice). A combination of these classical techniques with genetic perturbation and molecular profiling procedures have provided background on the regulatory networks controlling the cell fate choice. The release of transcriptomics to describe programmes of development in a molecular way gave researchers a chance to identify the modes of gene expression that organize the procedure of differentiation and tissue development. Irrespective of these developments, bulk transcriptomic technologies are constrained in nature. They obscure the heterogeneity that exists in tissues through averaging gene expression in a large number of cells. Small transient physiological states of a sample, low-frequency cell types, and low-level transcriptional noise of a sample are usually washed out by ensemble measures, and we have poor understanding of the dynamic properties of development. Another consequence of this averaging effect is it becomes more difficult to track bifurcations of lineage, discovering stochastic variation in gene expression, and relating transcriptional states to spatial and temporal developmental context. This has created the fact that a vast majority of the strict regulators of fate specification and cell-cell communication have been able to escape population-level studies.

The advent of transcriptomics on single-cells has revolutionized developmental systems by facilitating the discovery of rare or functionally differentiated populations, developmental programs and regulatory regimen to mediate lineage loss, all made possible by the capability to quantify the expression of genes in single-cells. Advances in technology have expanded the extent and use of these types of studies, such as full-length transcript in low-throughput sequencing such as Smart-seq2 to the massively large scale droplet-based sequencing of 10x Genomics. In more recent times, the capability of integrating the spatial transcriptomics and multi-omics has made

possible the interface of transcriptional states with epigenetic, proteomic or positional measures, offering a novel perspective on the molecular logic of development. Besides critical biology, single-cell transcriptomics also has significant implications to human health. Many diseases, including congenital abnormalities, cancer, neurodegenerative diseases and immune dysfunctions, are due to maladjusted developmental processes, or maladjusted cell-state transitions, which scRNA-seq provides a new means to relate the dynamics of normal development to pathological processes. It allows identifying cell states of disease relevance, biomarker discovery, and specificity regulator regenerative solution and treatment.

The review provides a summary of the current progress in the application of single-cell transcriptomics in developmental biology and disease. We represent new technology, computing, case studies on critical developmental systems and how each of the approaches can be applied in the study of the cellular, molecular etiology of pathology. Finally, we consider the problems that lie ahead such as data sparsity, technical variability, and integrative analysis and outline future opportunities to best take advantage of single-cell techniques in basic research and clinical translation.

2. Advances in Single-Cell Transcriptomics Technologies

With the rapid methodological shift to single-cell transcriptomics, labs have now switched to low throughput high sensitivity assays that can now scale to tens of thousands of cells profiled in a single experiment which has become massively parallel. The innovations have been paramount in facilitating the scaled analysis of single cells to be used in different biological studies. The first methods Smart-seq and its advancement Smart-seq2 were the milestones in the sphere of advanced single-cell biology because of providing a comprehensive coverage of transcripts with the high sensitivity [1]. Since these techniques were capable of detecting subtle differences between isoforms and lowly expressed genes, they were particularly applicable in a descriptive study of the transcriptome of small cell groups. They were low throughput, though, and cost per-cell prohibitively high so did not lend themselves to large scale developmental studies. In response to these limitations, droplet-based approaches of Drop-seq and commercially available system of 10x Genomics Chromium were proposed. In these systems, single cells and barcoded beads are encased in microdroplets to enable the massively parallel capture and sequencing of thousands of cells at a fraction of the cost of the prior system [2], [3]. Their scalability and performance has made them the staples of large scale cohort studies and developmental atlases even in cases where fully information is not needed (i.e., 3 8 transcript coverage). In addition to these systems, microwell-based systems such as Seq-Well and Microwell-Seq have also been invented to provide flexible and viable alternatives that are cost-effective, portable and scalable and can be ensured in different laboratory settings [4], [5]. They are particularly useful when the sample sizes are large, when there are some budgetary constraints or when portability is required.

More recent technologies have improved the single-cell transcriptomics beyond the expression profiling. The Slide-seq, Visium and MERFISH techniques of spatial transcriptomics provide the opportunity to measure gene expression in situ with preserved tissue architecture [6] -[8]. This has led to the provision of new avenues in the determination of what the cells are, their physical surrounding, and their interactions in the developmental and the pathological environment. Similarly, methods of multi-omics such as CITE-seq and scRNA-seq in combination with scATAC-seq generate transcriptomic data both on expression of surface protein markers or accessibility of chromatin and provide a more global view of cell states and of regulatory mechanisms [9]. The other interesting change is Perturb-seq that combines CRISPR-based genetic perturbations with single-cell transcriptomics to comprehensively evaluate genetic perturbations to transcriptional outcome compared to single cells [10]. In this way, causally dissecting gene regulatory networks is possible, and has been used to uncover the role of specific genes in lineage decisions during development. Together, these technical improvements have rendered single-cell transcriptomics an effective toolkit which may be utilized in developmental biology and in studies of diseases. Both platforms have trade-offs in sensitivity, scalability and resolution and selection of approach is dependent upon the biological question and experimental background. With the current development of the field, the combination of high-throughput, spatial, and multi-omics methods is likely to further sharpen our perception of cellular heterogeneity and dynamic processes of health and disease. Table 1 has a comparative overview of key scRNA-seq platforms by sensitivity, throughput, and cost, illustrating the trade-offs that can be used to select the platform to be used in various developmental biology applications. The overall steps of scRNA-seq are the isolation of a single cell, preparation of libraries by reverse transcription and amplification, massive sequencing, and algorithmic calculation to cluster and infer lineage (Figure 1). All these measures are the basis on which other

platforms like Smart-seq2, Drop-seq and 10x Genomics have been established.

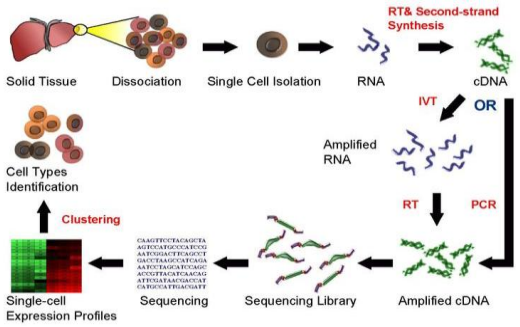

Fig. 1. Workflow of single-cell RNA sequencing (scRNA-seq) from tissue isolation to computational analysis.

Workflow of single-cell RNA sequencing (scRNA-seq). The process begins with tissue dissociation and single-cell isolation, followed by RNA extraction, cDNA synthesis, and amplification. Sequencing libraries are generated and analyzed to obtain single-cell expression profiles, which are clustered to identify distinct cell types and states.

Table 1. Summary of scRNA-seq platforms

Platform	Sensitivity	Throughput	Cost per cell	Key Features/Notes
Smart-seq2	Very high (full-length)	Low (<1,000 cells/run)	High	Excellent for isoform analysis; sensitive for low-abundance transcripts
Drop-seq	Moderate (3′ coverage)	Very high (>10,000 cells)	Low	Cost-effective, droplet microfluidics; limited to 3′ ends
10x Genomics	High (3′ or 5′)	Very high (>100,000 cells)	Moderate	Commercially standardized, robust, widely used for large atlases
Seq-Well	Moderate	High (10,000–50,000 cells)	Low	Portable, scalable microwell-based platform
Microwell-Seq	Moderate	Very high (>100,000 cells)	Low	Enables organism-scale cell atlas studies (e.g., mouse cell atlas)
Spatial Transcriptomics (Visium, Slide-seq, MERFISH)	Moderate (spatially resolved)	Moderate to high (depends on method)	High	Provides spatial context, resolution varies by technology
CITE-seq / Multi-omics (scRNA+Protein)	High (RNA + protein)	High	Moderate to high	Integrates transcriptome with surface protein markers for richer cell profiling

3. Computational Frameworks for Single-Cell Analysis

The fast and dramatic advancements in single-cell transcriptomics have been made possible not only by experimental technologies but also by computational frameworks that enable the researcher to process, analyze and interpret the enormous and complex datasets obtained. These models resolve the issues of technical noise, dropouts, high dimensions, and the heterogeneous data integration. The subsections below summarize the computational steps that are critical to the process of single-cell data analysis, including preprocessing, through integrative modeling.

3.1 Preprocessing and Quality Control

Raw scRNA-seq data consist of both a true biological signal and technical artifacts and therefore preprocessing is an essential step. Quality control normally entails the sifting out of poor-quality cells on the basis of library size, the quantity of identified genes, and the mitochondrial genes content. Cells containing abnormally high mitochondrial RNA fractions are likely to be either stress or apoptotic and are not used in the downstream analysis. They are then normalized by normalization techniques, e.g. log-normalization, variance-stabilizing transformations to normalize sequencing depth and technical variability [11].The most widely used dimensionality reduction methods are principal component analysis (PCA) which are used to minimize noise

and also identify the most informative features. The high-dimensional data are then visualized in a two-dimensional space with nonlinear techniques t-stochastic neighbor embedding (t-SNE) and Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP) [12], [13].

3.2 Clustering and Cell Type Annotation

After maintaining high-quality cells and shrinking them down to informative sizes, the cells that have similar transcriptomic profiles are placed into clusters using clustering techniques. Graph based clustering algorithms like Louvain and Leiden algorithm are especially common, because they use nearest neighbor graphs to identify groups of cells in huge datasets [14], [15]. The clusters are then associated with biologically meaningful cell types based on the comparison of their expression profiles with the known marker genes or reference datasets. Discovery of marker genes which is normally done through differential expression analysis facilitates the identification of genes that are cluster specific which determine cell identity. This is further streamlined by reference-based annotation techniques and automated pipelines, which run in platforms like Seurat [16] and Scanpy [17] and enable annotation of large single cell atlases of tissues and species.

3.3 Lineage and Trajectory Inference

The other strength of scRNA-seq is that scRNA-seq can be used to reconstruction dynamically evolved processes such as cell differentiation and cell lineage commitment. The techniques of the trajectory inference are also referred to as the pseudotime analysis which puts the place cells on a line that shows how the development occurred. Tools Monocle [18] and Slingshot [19] is a recreation of the computational derivatives of a branching structure to achieve a bifurcation of lineage and intermediate states. But most recently, RNA velocity techniques, which are used in frameworks such as scVelo [20]) suggest the future of individual cells depending on the disparity between spliced and unspliced mRNA abundance. This dynamic modelling provides time dependent directionality and has been particularly useful in the analysis of dynamical systems whose development is rapid, where intermediate states may be experimentally difficult to determine.

3.4 Integration with Multi-Omics and Spatial Data

The current single-cell study tendency is to introduce transcriptomic data into other complementary biological regulation levels. The integration models, such as Seurat v5 [16] and Harmony [21], enable the researcher to assemble the datasets generated in a large number of batches, technologies, or experimental settings and overcome the influence of batch. These statistical tools as Multi-Omics Factor Analysis (MOFA+) [22] can provide a framework to combine scRNA-seq, scATAC-seq, proteomic and epigenomic measurements in case of multi-omics data, which presents a common and modality-specific source of variation. Besides an integration of molecular layers, other challenges are also associated with spatially resolved transcriptomics since it entails molecular profiles matching tissue framework. Computational tools with spatially resolved scRNA-seq can be examined to give the researcher information regarding cell-cell communication networks, local microenvironmental forces, and tissue-level organization. These integrative approaches have significance in the mediating of the molecular heterogeneity into space and functional context in developmental systems.

4. Applications in Developmental Biology

The significance of single-cell transcriptomics in developmental biology The single-cell transcriptomics has provided an unparalleled insight into the developmental biology through the identification of cellular and molecular processes that control embryogenesis, organogenesis and stem cell activity. scRNA-seq has shown lineage states, rare progenitor states and transcriptional programs that could not be observed in bulk analyses by taking advantage of the dynamic changes in gene expression of a population of cells.

4.1 Embryogenesis and Early Development

Mapping of lineage specification during embryogenesis has been one of the best and pioneering applications of scRNA-seq. Single-cell profiling in both mouse and human embryos has been able to recapitulate cell fate differentiation between the zygote and the blastocyst stage, discovering transcriptional regulators that mediate the segregation of the epiblast, trophectoderm and primitive endoderm lineages [23], [24]. In gastrulation scRNA-seq has facilitated the identification of rare progenitor groups that are intermediates in mesoderm, endoderm and ectoderm development [25]. Such studies have identified conserved gene regulatory networks among the species and also identified human unique transcriptional programmes during early development [26]. Notably, the dynamism resolution of the scRNA-seq has given a systems perspective on how time cues and signaling networks can organize the development of tissue-specific progenitors. With pseudotime analysis, scRNA-seq can be used to recreate developmental trajectories and define branching events, which can be related to lineage specification. These methods have defined embryonic differentiation of

progenitor cells to ectodermal, mesodermal and endodermal lines of differentiation, providing a dynamic perspective of gastrulation (Figure 2).

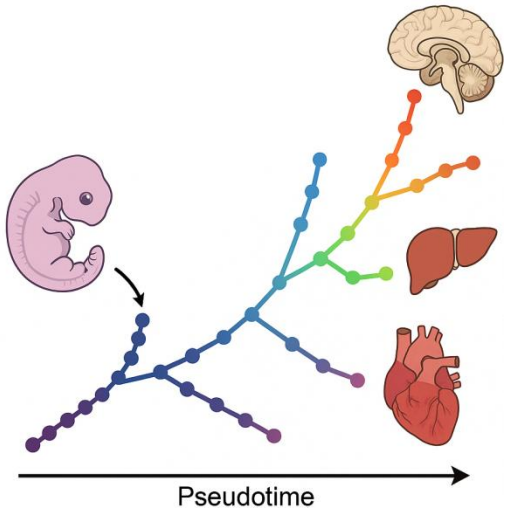

Fig. 2. Trajectory map of embryonic development using pseudotime analysis.

Pseudotime analysis of embryonic development into conceptual trajectory map. The cells are arranged in the form of branching patterns that reflect the pathways taken by differentiation of a common progenitor cell. The branches have been related to major specification of the germ layers (ectoderm, mesoderm, and endoderm) with the representative organs (brain, heart, liver) depicting the outcome of any lineage. Colours show pseudotime sequential changes of early to late developmental stages.
-Figure 2 was designed by the authors using original vector illustrations for academic and educational purposes.

4.2 Organogenesis

During the embryo, organogenesis is the process of differentiation of precursor populations into specialized tissues that is coordinated by the advances in the embryo beyond gastrulation. The scRNA-seq of the developing brain has revealed a wonderful heterogeneity of neural progenitors, including a unique transcriptional program of cortical layering, neuronal subtype differentiation, and glial lineage progression. These have provided us with a further insight into the neurodevelopmental mechanisms and how they are disturbed in such conditions like autism and microcephaly. Single-cell profiling in the heart has defined how transcriptional regulation of cardiomyocyte differentiation occurs, such as the cascades of transcription factors and signaling pathways that patter the chambers and mature their functions [29]. Equally, it has been demonstrated in the hematopoietic system that trajectory inference of scRNA-seq data has been able to reconstruct the branching points in hematopoietic stem cell development into the various blood and immune cell lineages. These findings have explained the time-limiting lineage and limitation, new intermediate progenitor, and regenerative and curative regimens in blood diseases.

4.3 Stem Cell and Regenerative Biology

Single-cell transcriptomics has also provided the groundbreaking insights in stem cell biology and regenerative medicine in addition to embryonic biology. scRNA-seq has also revealed transcriptional heterogeneity in previously homogenous populations using pluripotent stem cell profiling and identified sub-states of naive, primed and intermediate pluripotency [32]. These findings have narrowed down our perceptions of stem cell plasticity and their differentiation ability. Single-cell profiling of pluripotent stem cell or tissue-specific based in vitro organoids has been applied in regenerative biology to benchmark the transcriptional fidelity of these organoids against native tissues. These studies have made it clear that organoid modeling has achieved successes as well as limitations and has indicated where in vitro systems successfully recap developmental programs and where maturation or spatial organization has not been fully achieved, [29]. Notably, refinements ensured by scRNA-seq in culture-based workflows are expediting the creation of increasingly physiologically relevant organoid models with general implications in disease modeling, drug discovery and regenerative medicine.

5. Bridging to Disease Mechanisms

Single-cell transcriptomics are not only relevant to the development of an organism but also to the examination of human disorders, most of which may be considered the disruption of developmental programs. Transitional states, lineage mis-specifications and cellular heterogeneity: scRNA-seq fills the developmental biology-pathology gap. The use of single-cell technologies is demonstrated in congenital diseases, cancer, neurodegeneration, and immune dysfunction. One common motif in the literature of single cell research is that numerous human diseases may be seen as maladaptation of standard developmentary programs. The scRNA-seq compares normal developmental processes with pathological conditions, which identify lineage arrests, abnormal reprogramming and distorted differentiation outcomes (Figure 3).

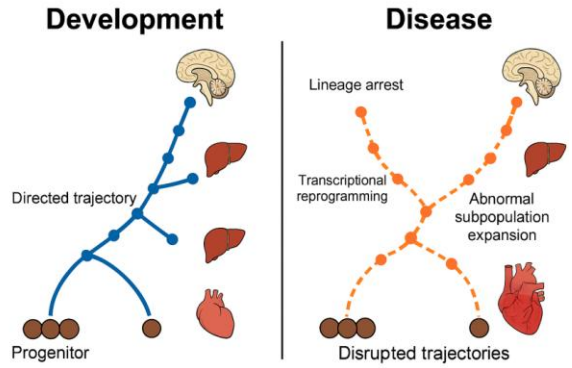

Fig. 3. Comparative landscape of organ development versus disease states.

Conceptual comparison of organ development and disease progression revealed by single-cell transcriptomics. Normal developmental trajectories (left) illustrate coordinated differentiation of progenitors into mature, functional cell types, whereas disease states (right) exhibit disrupted trajectories characterized by lineage arrest, transcriptional reprogramming, and abnormal subpopulation expansion. Representative examples include cardiomyocytemis-specification in congenital heart disease, progenitor reactivation in glioblastoma, and immune dysregulation in autoimmunity.

5.1 Developmental Disorders

A number of congenital diseases can be traced to the visitation of the lineage specification of the early embryo or organ formation. Single-cell profiling in congenital heart disease, defects in specification of cardiac progenitor cells have been revealed, and transcriptional programs that do not effectively specify mesodermal cells into cardiomycyte lineages have been identified. These results report mechanistic information about structural defects like septal defects and outflow tract defects. Equally, neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities have been associated with impaired development of neuronal-subtypes and impaired cortical-layering. Through mapping transcriptional heterogeneity during developing brains, scRNA-seq has demonstrated the roles of perturbation of progenitor fate choices and gene regulation of synapses in the development of diseases.

5.2 Cancer as a Disease of Developmental Dysregulation

Cancer has been gaining more and more as a condition of developmental reprogramming where normal differentiation hierarchies are compromised. The single-cell transcriptomics has shown amazing heterogeneity of tumors whereby cancer cell populations frequently have stem-like transcriptional profiles, resembling embryonic or tissue progenitors. The scRNA-seq has shown that lineage plasticity and therapy resistance in glioblastoma can be represented by the tumor cells taking on a neural progenitor-like and mesenchymal-like state. On the same note, the malignant cells in leukemia often usurp the hematopoietic programs, culminating in the termination of differentiation and unregulated increase. These lessons highlight the fact that tumorigenesis uses developmental pathways and they offer prospects of using lineage-specific vulnerabilities.

5.3 Neurodegeneration and Aging

Single-cell transcriptomic maps of vulnerable neuronal populations have re-defined neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer and Parkinson. Selective loss and dysfunction of excitatory neurons as well as neuroinflammatory microglial subtypes have been identified in scRNA-seq in Alzheimer disease. In PD, susceptible dopaminergic subpopulations in the substantia nigra have characteristic transcriptional patterns that precondition their degeneration. Aging as a process is in general related to augmented transcriptional noise, diminished cell-type fidelity and to the loss of cellular identity in tissues. These alterations have been shown in single-cell models to cause impaired tissue regeneration and increased vulnerability to age-related disease and can serve as new biomarkers of cellular aging as well as be the target of rejuvenation approaches.

5.4 Immune Dysregulation and Autoimmunity

An excellent illustration of the way scRNA-seq can be used to connect disease with developmental processes is the immune system. During chronic infections and cancer, there is an exhaustion of T cell populations, which is manifested by the distortion of transcriptional programs and a reduction in effector functions. Exhaustion specific transcription factors and checkpoint molecules have been discovered by single-cell profiling and are currently being exploited as therapeutic targets in immuno-oncology. The scRNA-seq in autoimmune diseases has revealed alterations in B cell and myeloid lineage differentiation, resulting in the aberrant antigen presentation, cytokine signals, and tissue infiltration. These results reveal the developmental basis of immune dysregulation and provide strategies of immune homeostasis restoration with the help of specific therapies. Table 2 is a synopsis of the large contexts of development and disease in which scRNA-seq has yielded revolutionary insights, starting with embryogenesis, and cancer and neurodegeneration.

Table 2: Key developmental and disease applications of scRNA-seq

Biological Context	Key Insights from scRNA-seq	Representative Findings/Applications
Embryogenesis	Lineage specification, rare progenitors, germ layer bifurcation	Human and mouse blastocyst mapping; gastrulation cell fate decisions
Brain Development	Neural progenitor heterogeneity, cortical layering, neuronal subtypes	Identification of radial glia and interneuron precursors
Heart Development	Cardiomyocyte lineage specification, chamber-specific transcriptional programs	Developmental reprogramming linked to congenital heart disease
Hematopoiesis	Differentiation trajectories from HSCs to mature immune lineages	Mapping of myeloid, lymphoid, and rare progenitors
Cancer	Tumor heterogeneity, stem-like subpopulations, lineage plasticity	Glioblastoma reprogramming, leukemia differentiation arrest
Neurodegeneration	Vulnerable neuronal populations, microglial states	Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease cell-specific vulnerability
Immune Dysregulation	T cell exhaustion, abnormal B/myeloid subpopulations	Insights into autoimmunity and chronic infections
Regenerative Biology	Pluripotency states, organoid fidelity, stem cell maturation	Refinement of organoid systems for disease modeling and therapy

6. Challenges and Limitations

Single-cell transcriptomics has a number of drawbacks even though its effect has been transformative. Noise and variation and large cohort studies are constrained by high costs and scalability technologically, dropouts and batch effects cause these. Transcriptomic profiles are context sensitive biologically and interpretation of cell states in various developmental or disease conditions are complicated due to lineage plasticity. The key issues are the computational integration of heterogeneous data and ensuring that it can be reproduced and generate biologically meaningful interpretations of high-dimensional data. To overcome these inadequacies, improved experimental protocols, improved normalization and integration algorithms, and multi-omics models will be needed to be able to apply the findings of single-cell entities to sound biological and medical inferences.

7. Future Directions

The single-cell transcriptomics will certainly be expanded further in future both in regard to technology, computation and translational developments. Using the approaches of artificial intelligence and deep learning is turning into a standard to improve the prediction of cell states, inferential approaches, and even reconstructions of regulatory networks. Such models can be used to model complicated nonlinear associations among non-dimensional data and this enables more accurate identification of small subpopulations as well as dynamic shifts that would not be identified using other approaches. Multi-omics where the space is resolved is another frontier which is developing rapidly. With the help of scRNA-seq in combination with spatial transcriptomics, epigenomics, and proteomics, it becomes possible to locate molecular profiles on their native tissue structure. It is also crucial to the study of cell cell interactions, microenvironmental regulation, and tissue organization of the tissue level in development, and disease progression as the context-sensitive analysis of single-cells. Single-cell transcriptomics also have increased users in translation. Liquidity scRNA-seq Liquid biopsy has the potential in imaging of noninvasive circulating tumor cells, immune cell and maturation defects in prenatal diagnostics. The acquired lessons in these approaches will accelerate the development of accuracy therapeutics to disease-relevant cell conditions and patient-specific profiles. Finally, these developments must be hand in hand with ethical issues. The increasing result of single-cell profiling in human embryonic and clinical studies is raising very major issues in terms of privacy of information, informed consent as well as responsible use of sensitive biological information. Appropriate guidelines on how the data can be shared, clinical uses and ethical governance will also be important to ensure that the single-cell technologies are utilised in a responsible way without affecting the scientific and medical potential in any way.

8. CONCLUSION

The single-cell transcriptomics have revolutionized the developmental biology field by establishing the molecular specifications of cellular heterogeneity and active lineage decisions. It can identify populations that are rare, intermediate, and regulatory programs that establish normal development and its failure in disease by moving past bulk analyses. This is the capacity to connect

cell fate determination and pathological processes which signifies a fundamental interface between fundamental biology and translational medicine. The integration of multi-omics, spatially resolved profiling, and AI-based computational systems will even be more ideal in enhancing the resolution and interpretability of individual cells in the future. The above developments will accelerate the identification of biomarkers, enhance regenerative paradigms, and direct precision therapeutics, and single-cell transcriptomics emerge as a platform of future biomedical research and clinical science.

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