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QUALITY BY DESIGN APPROACHES IN ANALYTICAL METHOD DEVELOPMENT FOR MEDICINAL CHEMISTRY COMPOUNDS

[1]Sahil Patil, [2]Pratibha Makar, [3]Dr. Vijaykumar Kale, [4]Dr. Mahesh Thakare, [5]Vaibhav Narwade

[1]Student, [2]Assistant Professor, [3]Principal, [4]Associate Professor, [5]Assistant Professor
[1]Department of B. Pharmacy,
[1]Kasturi Shikshan Sanstha College of Pharmacy, Shikrapur, India

Abstract: The implementation of Quality by Design (QbD) approaches in analytical method development has revolutionized the pharmaceutical industry's approach to quality assurance and pharmaceutical development. This review provides a comprehensive assessment of Analytical Quality by Design (AQbD) methodologies applied to medicinal chemistry compounds. The systematic review encompasses the fundamental principles of QbD derived from International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) guidelines, the critical stages of AQbD implementation, and the application of Design of Experiments (DoE) in chromatographic method optimization. Special emphasis is placed on the establishment of Analytical Target Profile (ATP), identification of Critical Method Parameters (CMP), risk assessment strategies, and the development of Method Operable Design Region (MODR). The review demonstrates how AQbD approaches enhance method robustness, reduce out-of-specification and out-of-trend results, and facilitate regulatory flexibility throughout the product lifecycle. This paper synthesizes recent advances in AQbD applications, discusses the superiority of science-based approaches over traditional empirical methods, and highlights the integration of multivariate data analysis with quality risk management. Comprehensive coverage includes HPLC, LC-MS, and stability-indicating method development strategies specifically tailored for pharmaceutical quality control. The review concludes that adoption of AQbD principles represents a paradigm shift toward proactive quality integration and continuous improvement in analytical method development for medicinal compounds.

Keywords: Analytical Quality by Design, Critical Method Parameters, Design of Experiments, Method Operable Design Region, Analytical Target Profile, ICH Guidelines, HPLC Method Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pharmaceutical industry has undergone significant transformation with the implementation of Quality by Design (QbD) concepts, which represent a fundamental shift from reactive quality assurance to proactive quality integration[1]. The International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) guidelines, particularly Q8, Q9, Q10, and the recently updated Q14, have established the framework for systematic pharmaceutical development and quality systems[2]. Quality by Design fundamentally proposes that quality should be built into a product and its manufacturing process by design rather than being assured solely through end-product testing. This philosophical transformation extends beyond product development to analytical method development, thereby establishing the concept of Analytical Quality by Design (AQbD)[3].

Analytical procedures constitute the backbone of pharmaceutical quality control and play a critical role in ensuring product efficacy, safety, and compliance with regulatory standards. Traditional approaches to analytical method development have historically relied on trial-and-error experimentation, which is labor-intensive, time-consuming, and frequently results in suboptimal methods that lack robustness[4]. The conventional empirical approach often fails to establish a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between critical method parameters and analytical responses, leading to increased occurrence of out-of-specification (OOS) and out-of-trend (OOT) results during routine analytical operations. In contrast, AQbD provides a systematic and science-based methodology that enables pharmaceutical scientists to develop robust, efficient, and lifecycle-adaptable analytical methods[5].

The application of AQbD to medicinal chemistry compounds necessitates a thorough understanding of the physicochemical properties of the analyte, potential degradation products, and the interaction of method parameters with analytical system

components. For medicinal chemistry compounds, the complexity of structural diversity, ranging from simple organic molecules to complex natural products, demands sophisticated analytical approaches capable of distinguishing the active pharmaceutical ingredient from impurities, degradation products, and matrix components. The regulatory environment has become increasingly stringent, with agencies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), European Medicines Agency (EMA), and other regulatory bodies expecting comprehensive documentation of method development rationale, scientific justification, and demonstrated robustness[6].

This comprehensive review examines the implementation of QbD approaches specifically in the context of analytical method development for medicinal chemistry compounds. The review addresses the fundamental principles of AQbD, the systematic stages of method development utilizing Design of Experiments (DoE), the establishment of Analytical Target Profiles (ATP), risk assessment methodologies, and the practical applications of these approaches in chromatographic and mass spectrometric techniques. Furthermore, the review synthesizes current best practices in method lifecycle management, including continuous improvement strategies and regulatory flexibility concepts enabled by QbD-developed methods.

II. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF ANALYTICAL QUALITY BY DESIGN

A. Definition and Scope of Analytical Quality by Design

Analytical Quality by Design represents the application of QbD principles specifically to analytical procedure development and represents a sophisticated departure from traditional analytical method development approaches[7]. Unlike conventional methods that are often developed through sequential variation of single parameters, AQbD employs systematic, science-based methodology that comprehensively evaluates the multifactorial nature of analytical procedures. The concept emerged from the recognition that analytical methods developed with QbD principles exhibit superior robustness, reproducibility, and cost-effectiveness compared to conventionally developed methods.

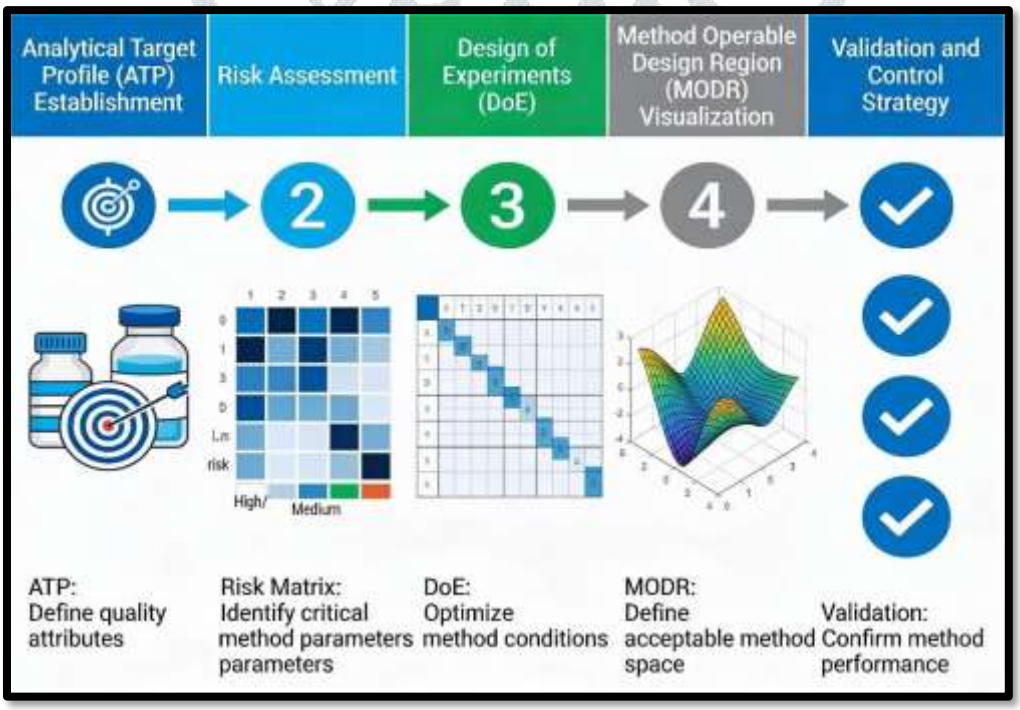

Fig 1: Quality by Design Workflow for Analytical Method Development.

The fundamental objective of AQbD is to establish a thorough understanding of how various method parameters, such as pH, buffer concentration, organic modifier composition, flow rate, column temperature, and column chemistry, collectively influence analytical responses including resolution, retention time, peak tailing factor, theoretical plate count, and detection sensitivity[8]. This comprehensive understanding facilitates the definition of a Method Operable Design Region (MODR), which represents the region within which the analytical method can be operated while maintaining predefined performance specifications. The MODR concept provides regulatory flexibility, permitting analytical procedure modifications within the established design space without requiring revalidation, thereby reducing regulatory burden and facilitating continuous improvement[9].

B. Regulatory Foundation and ICH Guidelines Framework

The regulatory framework for AQbD is established through International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) guidelines, specifically Q8 (Pharmaceutical Development), Q9 (Quality Risk Management), Q10 (Pharmaceutical Quality Systems), Q14 (Analytical Procedure Development), and Q2(R2) (Validation of Analytical Procedures)[10]. The ICH Q8 guideline introduced the concept of Quality Target Product Profile (QTPP) and design space for product development, establishing the foundational principles that have

been adapted for analytical procedures. ICH Q9 provides comprehensive guidance on Quality Risk Management (QRM), offering systematic methodologies for identifying, evaluating, and mitigating risks associated with analytical procedures[11]. The newly updated ICH Q14 guideline specifically addresses analytical procedure development, introducing the Analytical Target Profile (ATP) as the cornerstone concept parallel to the QTPP in product development.

ICH Q2(R2) establishes validation parameters and acceptance criteria for analytical procedures, including specificity, linearity, accuracy, precision, range, robustness, and system suitability. The harmonization of these guidelines across regulatory regions ensures consistency in expectations and facilitates the acceptance of QbD-developed methods by regulatory authorities globally. The regulatory acceptance of AQbD-developed methods is evidenced by FDA approvals of New Drug Applications (NDAs) incorporating analytical procedures developed using QbD approaches, demonstrating regulatory commitment to this scientific framework.

C. Comparison of Traditional Versus Quality by Design Approaches

The distinction between traditional analytical method development and AQbD approaches represents a fundamental paradigm shift in pharmaceutical analytical sciences. Traditional approaches typically involve sequential variation of single parameters while maintaining other factors constant, often referred to as the "one-factor-at-a-time" (OFAT) methodology. This approach, while conceptually straightforward, presents several limitations including failure to identify synergistic or antagonistic interactions between parameters, requirement for substantial experimental effort to achieve optimization, and development of methods lacking comprehensive robustness understanding[12]. Consequently, methods developed through traditional approaches frequently display inadequate robustness when subjected to small deliberate variations in operating conditions.

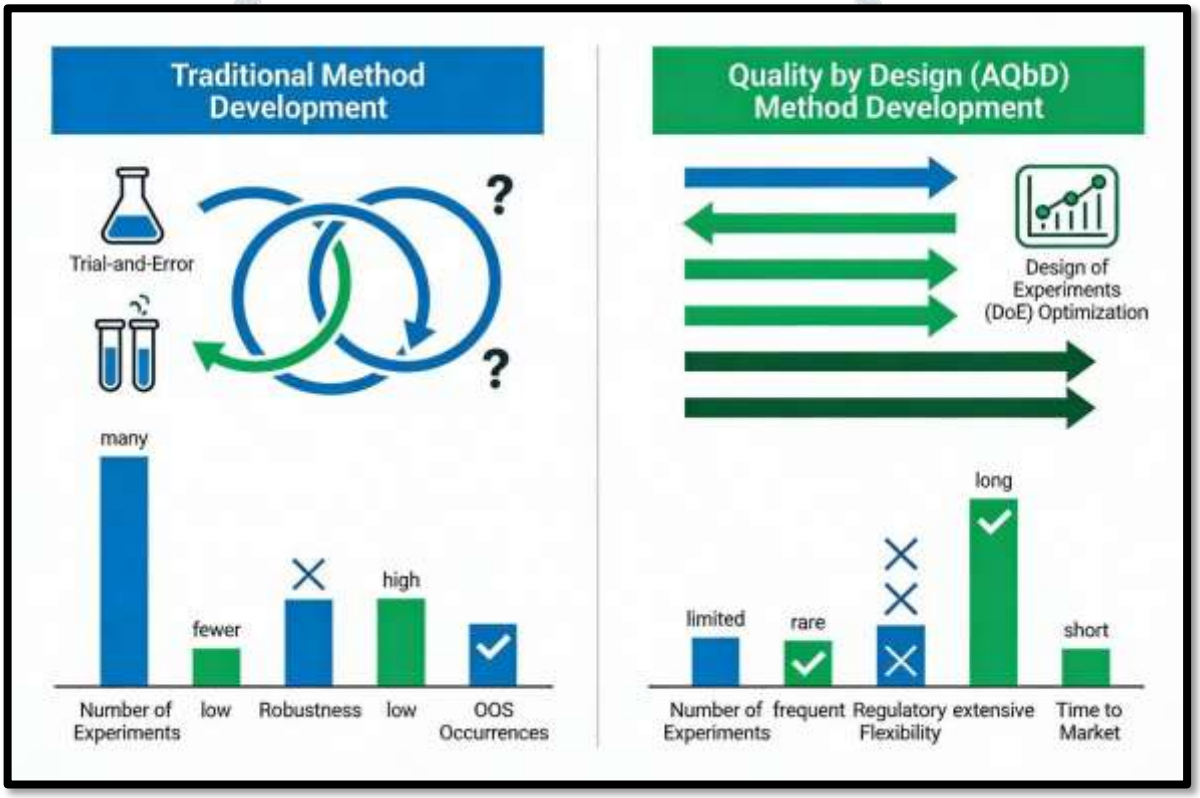

Fig 2: Comparison of Traditional versus Quality by Design Method Development

In contrast, AQbD employs multivariate experimental design strategies that simultaneously evaluate multiple parameters and their interactions, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the analytical system. Design of Experiments (DoE) enables researchers to comprehensively model the relationship between input variables (method parameters) and output responses (analytical characteristics) through systematic factorial or response surface designs[13]. This approach typically requires fewer total experiments compared to traditional sequential methods while providing significantly greater information regarding parameter interactions and method robustness. The result is development of methods that are inherently robust, exhibit reduced OOS and OOT occurrences, demonstrate reproducibility across different laboratories and analytical systems, and provide regulatory flexibility through established design spaces[14].

III. ANALYTICAL TARGET PROFILE AND CRITICAL QUALITY ATTRIBUTES

A. Definition and Establishment of Analytical Target Profile

The Analytical Target Profile (ATP) represents a prospective summary of the performance criteria that an analytical procedure must achieve to appropriately assess the quality of pharmaceutical materials, specifically as they relate to Critical Quality Attributes (CQA)[15]. The ATP serves as a blueprint for analytical procedure development and establishes the target measurement performance

characteristics including accuracy, precision, sensitivity, specificity, and robustness. The ATP is conceptually analogous to the Quality Target Product Profile (QTPP) employed in pharmaceutical product development, functioning as the quality objectives that drive the entire analytical development process.

Establishment of a comprehensive ATP requires systematic evaluation of the intended purpose of the analytical procedure, the desired range of analyte concentration to be measured, the acceptable limit on measurement uncertainty for quality decision-making, and the analytical platform considerations. For medicinal chemistry compounds, the ATP development process must account for the chemical complexity of the analyte, anticipated degradation products under various storage conditions, potential matrix interferences from formulation excipients, and the regulatory requirements for the specific analytical application. The ATP should clearly articulate performance specifications for critical analytical parameters including selectivity or specificity requirements for separating the active ingredient from related substances, linearity requirements across the analytical range, accuracy requirements expressed as acceptable recovery percentages, and precision requirements typically expressed as relative standard deviation (RSD) thresholds.

B. Critical Quality Attributes and Method-Related Parameters

In the context of AQbD, Critical Quality Attributes (CQA) within the analytical procedure refer to the key analytical characteristics that must be controlled to ensure method fitness for purpose. For chromatographic methods, primary CQA include peak resolution between critical peak pairs, retention time stability, peak tailing factor, theoretical plate count, and detection limit and quantitation limit values. Secondary CQA may include response factors, robustness parameters, and system suitability acceptance criteria[16]. The selection of CQA requires comprehensive understanding of the analytical technique employed and the specific quality attributes of the pharmaceutical product being analyzed.

Critical Method Parameters (CMP) represent the operational parameters of the analytical procedure that, when adjusted within specified ranges, directly influence the CQA. For high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC), typical CMP include mobile phase pH, buffer concentration, organic modifier type and percentage, flow rate, column temperature, column chemistry (stationary phase), and detection wavelength or mass-to-charge ratio values for mass spectrometric detection. Risk assessment procedures systematically identify which method parameters constitute true critical parameters versus those which can be operated within broader ranges without significantly affecting analytical performance[17]. The distinction between CMP and non-critical parameters is critical for establishing appropriate control strategies and defining reasonable ranges for operating conditions.

IV. RISK ASSESSMENT AND CRITICAL PARAMETER IDENTIFICATION

A. Quality Risk Management Principles

Quality Risk Management (QRM), as outlined in ICH Q9, provides a systematic and science-based framework for identifying, analyzing, and mitigating risks associated with analytical procedures throughout their lifecycle. The application of QRM to analytical method development enables pharmaceutical scientists to prioritize experimental efforts on factors with the greatest potential to impact analytical performance, thereby optimizing resource allocation and reducing unnecessary experimentation. A comprehensive risk assessment should begin with preliminary identification of all potential method parameters that could theoretically influence analytical responses, followed by systematic evaluation of the magnitude and probability of impact for each parameter.

The risk assessment process typically employs risk matrices or risk ranking tables that evaluate identified hazards based on probability of occurrence and severity of consequence. Parameters identified as presenting high or medium risk require further investigation and control, while those presenting low risk may be operated within broader ranges or eliminated from subsequent optimization studies. The systematic approach to risk assessment ensures that analytical method development efforts focus on parameters with genuine potential to compromise method robustness and fitness for purpose[18].

B. Screening Studies Using Plackett-Burman Design

Screening studies represent an initial phase of AQbD implementation wherein numerous potential method parameters are evaluated to identify those having statistically significant effects on critical analytical responses. Plackett-Burman designs, a type of fractional factorial design, represent an efficient experimental approach for screening scenarios where the number of potential factors exceeds the capacity of traditional factorial designs. These designs permit evaluation of numerous factors while maintaining a relatively modest number of experimental runs, making them particularly valuable when preliminary knowledge regarding factor effects remains limited.

In Plackett-Burman designs for analytical method development, multiple parameters such as pH, buffer molarity, organic modifier percentage, flow rate, and column temperature are simultaneously adjusted according to a predetermined experimental matrix, with each parameter evaluated at two discrete levels (typically representing low and high settings). The analysis of results permits identification of statistically significant parameters demonstrating substantial effects on critical responses, while factors exhibiting minimal effects can be eliminated from subsequent investigation or operated at nominal values. This systematic screening approach typically reduces the initial parameter set by 40-60%, concentrating optimization efforts on truly influential factors[19].

V. DESIGN OF EXPERIMENTS IN CHROMATOGRAPHIC METHOD OPTIMIZATION

A. Response Surface Methodology and Central Composite Design

Response Surface Methodology (RSM) represents an advanced statistical approach for modeling the relationship between multiple input variables and analytical responses through the development of empirical mathematical models. RSM designs, particularly central composite design (CCD) and Box-Behnken design (BBD), enable simultaneous evaluation of multiple parameters at multiple discrete levels (typically three levels), permitting investigation of both linear and non-linear effects as well as interactive effects between parameters. Central Composite Design consists of a complete factorial design at two levels combined with additional center points and axial points, thereby enabling the fitting of second-order polynomial equations that model response surfaces.

For medicinal chemistry compound analysis, CCD facilitates comprehensive evaluation of critical method parameters such as mobile phase composition, pH, temperature, and flow rate simultaneously, generating response surfaces that visualize the relationship between method parameters and analytical responses. The mathematical models derived from CCD can be employed to predict optimal parameter combinations, identify regions of maximum method robustness, and establish boundaries of the Method Operable Design Region. Statistical analysis of variance (ANOVA) permits quantification of factor significance and interaction effects, with regression coefficients indicating the magnitude and direction of parameter influence on responses.

B. Box-Behnken Design for Optimization

Box-Behnken Design (BBD) represents an alternative response surface design offering computational advantages over CCD, particularly when evaluating three to five critical parameters. BBD requires fewer experimental runs compared to CCD while maintaining capability for second-order model fitting and accurate response surface estimation. The design structure systematically positions experimental points at the midpoint of edges of the factor space combined with center replicates, eliminating the extreme combinations that sometimes produce unrealistic or infeasible experimental conditions.

In the context of HPLC method development for medicinal chemistry compounds, BBD enables efficient optimization of critical method parameters through evaluation of all two-way interactions without requiring examination of extreme parameter combinations. Optimization studies utilizing BBD generate mathematical models enabling prediction of method performance across the parameter space, identification of optimal parameter combinations, and establishment of ranges for each parameter within which acceptable method performance is maintained. Software such as Design-Expert permits visualization of response surfaces and contour plots, facilitating interpretation of complex parameter interactions and support for evidence-based decision-making regarding optimal and acceptable parameter ranges.

VI. ANALYTICAL APPLICATIONS IN MEDICINAL CHEMISTRY

A. HPLC Method Development for Small Molecule Analysis

High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) remains the most widely employed chromatographic technique for analytical testing of medicinal chemistry compounds, particularly for pharmaceutical product assay determination, impurity profiling, and stability-indicating method development. AQbD-based HPLC method development systematically optimizes separation selectivity through adjustment of mobile phase parameters including buffer type and concentration, organic modifier identity and composition, and pH conditions. The development of stability-indicating HPLC methods applying AQbD principles necessitates preliminary forced degradation studies under multiple stress conditions (acid-catalyzed, base-catalyzed, oxidative, thermal, and photolytic) to identify degradation products that must be separated from the active pharmaceutical ingredient.

Following identification of critical separation challenges, DoE-based optimization systematically identifies mobile phase compositions and other method parameters that achieve baseline resolution between the active ingredient and all identified impurities and degradation products. The establishment of Method Operable Design Region through DoE ensures that small variations in pH, buffer concentration, column temperature, or flow rate do not compromise analytical performance, thereby building robustness directly into the method during development. Documentation of the mathematical relationships between method parameters and critical analytical responses provides scientific justification for established method parameters and facilitates regulatory discussions regarding acceptable parameter ranges.

B. LC-MS Method Development for Drug Discovery and Characterization

Liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS) represents an increasingly important analytical platform for medicinal chemistry compound analysis, particularly in drug discovery and early development phases. The coupling of chromatographic separation with mass spectrometric detection provides orthogonal selectivity enabling identification and quantification of pharmaceutical compounds in complex biological matrices and pharmaceutical formulations. AQbD approaches applied to LC-MS method development systematically optimize chromatographic separation parameters (pH, buffer composition, organic modifier percentage, flow rate) and mass spectrometric parameters (ionization source temperature, nebulizer gas flow, detector voltage, mass-to-charge ratios for selected ion monitoring).

For medicinal chemistry applications, LC-MS methods developed using AQbD principles demonstrate improved selectivity for target analytes, enhanced sensitivity through optimized ionization conditions, and robust performance across varying matrix compositions. The multivariate approach inherent in AQbD permits simultaneous optimization of chromatographic and mass spectrometric parameters, identifying interactive effects that might not be apparent through sequential parameter optimization. Documentation of the rationale underlying selected chromatographic and mass spectrometric parameters, supported by DoE-generated evidence of robustness, facilitates regulatory acceptance of complex analytical procedures for pharmaceutical quality control.

VII. METHOD ROBUSTNESS AND VALIDATION WITHIN QBD FRAMEWORK

A. Robustness Testing and Method Operable Design Region

Robustness assessment represents a critical validation component within the AQbD framework, wherein analytical method performance is evaluated under deliberately varied operating conditions to determine the range of parameter values within which acceptable method performance is maintained. Traditional robustness testing, typically performed subsequent to method development using Plackett-Burman designs, examines one parameter at a time while maintaining others at nominal values. In contrast, AQbD-based robustness assessment incorporates robustness evaluation directly into the method development process through Design of Experiments, thereby building method robustness into the procedure design rather than merely validating it post-development.

The Method Operable Design Region (MODR) represents the identified parameter space within which the analytical method consistently meets predefined acceptance criteria for critical quality attributes. Establishment of the MODR requires comprehensive DoE studies followed by Monte Carlo simulations or similar probabilistic analyses that predict the probability of meeting acceptance criteria across the parameter space. The MODR definition provides regulatory flexibility by permitting analytical procedure adjustments within the established design space without requiring revalidation, thereby reducing time to regulatory submission and supporting continuous improvement initiatives. Documentation of the MODR in regulatory submissions demonstrates scientific understanding of the analytical procedure and provides justification for established operating conditions and acceptable parameter ranges.

B. System Suitability and Control Strategy Development

System Suitability Testing (SST) represents a critical quality control tool wherein analytical system performance is verified immediately prior to sample analysis through analysis of reference materials under specified conditions. Within the AQbD framework, system suitability acceptance criteria are established based on method performance data derived from DoE studies and robustness testing, ensuring that acceptance criteria are scientifically justified and reflect realistic method performance expectations. Typical system suitability parameters for chromatographic methods include theoretical plate count, peak asymmetry or tailing factor, resolution between critical peak pairs, and relative retention time values.

The control strategy for analytical procedures encompasses system suitability testing, reference material qualification, instrument calibration and maintenance protocols, and environmental controls that collectively ensure consistent method performance throughout the product lifecycle. Within the QbD framework, the control strategy is developed based on comprehensive understanding of the relationship between method parameters, environmental factors, and analytical responses derived from systematic DoE studies. A science-based control strategy permits risk-based adjustment of control measures during continuous improvement activities while maintaining confidence in analytical results[20].

VIII. BENEFITS AND REGULATORY ADVANTAGES

A. Enhanced Method Robustness and Reduced Quality Deviations

Implementation of AQbD approaches in analytical method development results in substantial improvements in method robustness, manifested through reduced occurrence of Out-of-Specification (OOS) and Out-of-Trend (OOT) results during routine analytical operations. The systematic and multivariate nature of AQbD-based method development, compared to traditional sequential optimization, generates analytical procedures with superior understanding of parameter interactions and more comprehensive robustness. Reduced OOS and OOT occurrences translate directly to improved product quality confidence, reduced resource utilization for investigating analytical deviations, and enhanced regulatory compliance.

The inherent robustness of AQbD-developed methods is particularly valuable for medicinal chemistry compounds exhibiting complex structures with multiple potential degradation pathways or formulations containing numerous excipients presenting potential interference challenges. The comprehensive parameter space exploration through DoE identifies operating windows wherein method performance remains stable despite minor variations in pH, temperature, flow rate, or other critical parameters, thereby ensuring reliable analytical results under real-world operational conditions.

B. Regulatory Flexibility and Lifecycle Management

A significant advantage of AQbD-developed analytical procedures is the regulatory flexibility they enable throughout the product

lifecycle. Traditional regulatory approaches typically require revalidation and regulatory approval for any procedural changes, including modifications to method parameters such as buffer pH or mobile phase composition. In contrast, analytical procedures developed using AQbD principles with clearly established Method Operable Design Regions can be modified within the established design space without revalidation requirements, provided scientific evidence documents that proposed changes remain within the MODR.

This regulatory flexibility translates to operational advantages including ability to implement continuous improvement initiatives, respond to instrument or material availability changes, accommodate method transfers between laboratories or contract manufacturers, and adapt to evolving analytical technologies without extensive regulatory interactions. The cost and time savings associated with reduced revalidation requirements provide substantial commercial advantages, particularly for established pharmaceutical products with long commercial lifecycles.

IX. CONCLUSION

Analytical Quality by Design represents a transformative approach to pharmaceutical analytical method development, fundamentally shifting from reactive quality assurance to proactive quality integration. The systematic application of Design of Experiments, Analytical Target Profile establishment, comprehensive risk assessment, and Method Operable Design Region definition collectively ensures development of inherently robust, scientifically defensible analytical procedures for medicinal chemistry compounds. For complex pharmaceutical compounds exhibiting structural diversity and multiple degradation pathways, AQbD methodologies provide sophisticated frameworks enabling comprehensive analytical characterization while reducing experimental resource requirements compared to traditional trial-and-error approaches. Regulatory acceptance by global pharmaceutical authorities, including FDA and EMA, validates the superiority of science-based method development. Organizations implementing AQbD principles demonstrate enhanced product quality assurance, reduced OOS/OOT occurrences, and facilitated continuous improvement throughout the analytical procedure lifecycle. Future evolution should incorporate advanced technologies including artificial intelligence and green analytical chemistry principles, while maintaining commitment to developing robust, fit-for-purpose analytical methods. The continued advancement and widespread adoption of AQbD approaches promises to enhance analytical method quality, regulatory compliance efficiency, and pharmaceutical industry capability to deliver safe, efficacious medicinal products to patients globally.

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