

S'pore-made cancer drug starts clinical trials

ETC-159 acts as an inhibitor of pathways that spread colorectal, ovarian, pancreatic cancers

By Nisha Ramchandani

nishar@sph.com.sg

@Nisha_BT

Singapore

A PUBLICLY-FUNDED drug has advanced into clinical trials, which could make it the first made-in-Singapore blockbuster cancer drug if successfully rolled out to market.

ETC-159, as it is known, will target a number of cancers, including colorectal, ovarian and pancreatic cancers, the Agency for Science, Technology and Re-

search (A*Star) and Duke-National University of Singapore Graduate Medical School (Duke-NUS) announced on Thursday.

Such cancers are associated with a group of cell signalling pathways known as Wnt signalling, found to promote the growth and spread of cancer, while ETC-159 acts as an inhibitor of these pathways.

Cancer is the principal cause of death in Singapore accounting for about 30 per cent of deaths in 2013, the Ministry of Health website shows.

A collaboration between A*Star's Experimental Therapeutics Centre (ETC), Drug Discovery and Development (D3) unit and Duke-NUS, the drug candidate has been under development since 2009. Around 5 per cent of the cancer population in Singapore is expected to benefit from the drug.

The Phase I clinical trial will study the safety and effect of ETC-159 in advanced solid tumours in up to 58 patients, A*Star and Duke-NUS said in a joint release. Phase I to III clinical trials – Phase III being the most advanced – can typically span from three to eight years in total.

Alex Matter, chief executive of ETC and D3, said: "The discovery and subsequent development of this drug candidate marks a major breakthrough in cancer therapeutics."

Trials will be carried out at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) and the National University Hospital (NUH) to start, with trials also to be launched in the US progressively. The first patient received the dosage last month.

Describing the breakthrough as an inflection point, Benjamin Seet, executive director of A*Star's Biomedical Research Council, expressed his confidence that more locally devel-

oped drugs in the pipeline will be tested and implemented in the future.

David Virshup, inaugural director of the programme in cancer and stem cell biology at Duke-NUS, added: "As the drug candidate provides a targeted cancer therapy, it could potentially minimise side effects and make cancer treatments more bearable for cancer patients. This is a major milestone that was made possible by Singapore's ongoing investment in basic and translational biomedical research to address unmet medical needs. It is fitting that Singaporeans might be the first to benefit from this Singapore-developed drug."