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# Home-grown blood cancer drug to start patient trials

**Jose Hong**

The developers of home-grown blood cancer drug ETC-206 hope to start trials in August on patients who are in the late stages of the cancer.

The drug, which is orally administered, will be tested on blood cancer patients in groups of three. Clinical trials began last December and will test up to 34 healthy volunteers.

ETC-206 was primarily developed by the Experimental Therapeutics Centre (ETC) and the Drug Discovery and Development Unit (D3), which are under the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star), as well as the Duke-NUS Medical School (Duke-NUS).

ETC-206 is Singapore's second publicly funded cancer drug candidate and will be meant for those suffering from later-stage cancer.

The first such publicly funded drug, ETC-159 – which is still undergoing clinical trials – targets a range of cancers, including colorectal, ovarian and pancreatic cancers.

Depending on how tests with ETC-206 progress, the number of patients in trials may increase.

Duke-NUS Associate Professor Ong Sin Tiong said that the drug is a form of targeted therapy, different from conventional chemotherapy.

Standard chemotherapy kills cells in a less specific fashion, affecting more than just the cancer cells, Prof Ong said. Meanwhile, ETC-206 inhibits an enzyme in cancer cells which the drug developers identified as a key player in promoting cancer growth when activated.

Prof Ong said that ETC-206 aims to inhibit the enzyme to the point where cancer cells are killed but normal cells are left intact.

Still, it could be years before the drug is on the market. It is still in the first phase of clinical trials, which tests for safety and tolerability. The second phase will test its efficacy, while only Phase 3 will see randomised clinical trials.

Singapore's concerted push into the biomedical field started almost 20 years ago.

When asked about the lengthy trials, Professor Alex Matter, chief executive of ETC and D3 said: "Drug development – even in large pharma multinational corporations – is a rigorous, extensive and long, drawn-out process that can take more than 10 years on average."

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