

Duke-NUS, Arcturus get nod for clinical trials in Singapore

Timothy Goh

A vaccine jointly developed by Duke-NUS Medical School and United States pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics has received approval for clinical trials.

This puts it with 24 other candidate vaccines around the world that are currently undergoing clinical evaluation.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of the school's emerging infectious diseases programme, previously told *The Straits Times* vaccine trials "exceeded expectations" and could potentially result in human trials being brought forward from September to next month.

But in a joint statement last night, the two organisations said Singa-

pore's Health Sciences Authority has given them the approval to proceed, and they would begin dosing humans with the vaccine, known as Lunar-Cov19, as soon as possible.

Prof Ooi said yesterday that pre-clinical studies of the vaccine have shown "very promising findings", including the possibility that a single dose might be sufficient to trigger a robust and durable immune response against the coronavirus.

He said: "We are very eager to start the first-in-human clinical trial here in Singapore and advance Lunar-Cov19 on its journey to becoming a potential commercial vaccine."

Lunar-Cov19 contains genetic material called mRNA, which encodes part of the virus. Injected into a person, it causes the body's

cells to begin manufacturing a protein similar to that of the virus, allowing the body to recognise and learn to fight it.

The first study will involve 108 healthy adult volunteers of various ages, and will be done to evaluate dose levels. A follow-up study will be conducted to evaluate the safety and tolerability of the vaccine, and the extent and duration of the body's immune responses.

Arcturus Therapeutics president and chief executive Joseph Payne said: "We are excited to advance this promising vaccine candidate into clinical trials."

Professor Thomas M. Coffman, dean of Duke-NUS Medical School, said: "There is a tremendous global imperative to develop effective preventive measures for Covid-19

infections. We are heartened by the rapid and promising progress in our vaccine collaboration with Arcturus as we move forward into clinical trials."

There has been a global race to develop a vaccine for the coronavirus, which many see as a key requirement to resuming global travel and reopening borders.

As of yesterday, aside from the 25 candidate vaccines in clinical evaluation, there were around 140 others in pre-clinical stages.

However, some experts earlier warned that there is little chance of mass distribution of a 100 per cent effective vaccine in the near future, and urged people to take safe distancing measures seriously.

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