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Actinium developing novel anticancers

The US firm, Actinium Pharmaceuticals, has teamed up with the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) to develop targeted radioimmunotherapeutics that promise to destroy tumours quickly while leaving healthy tissue intact.

The collaboration has coupled powerful alpha-particle emitting isotopes, either bismuth-213 or actinium-225, to monoclonal antibodies that target specific cancer cells. The conjugates lock on to and invade the tumour, delivering radiation directly into cancer cells to kill them.

Although this idea is not new – Idec Pharmaceuticals' Zevalin (90Y-ibritumomab tiuxetan) became the first available targeted radioimmunotherapy when it was launched in the US in March – the type of radiation being used is.

Alpha particles are particularly potent but can only travel short distances, around five cell widths. In comparison, beta-particle-emitting substances, such as the yttrium-90 used in Zevalin, penetrate several hundred-cell widths.

As a result, there should be less chance of damaging surrounding healthy tissue if alpha radiation is used. Actinium believes it is the only pharmaceutical company investigating alpha radiation-based therapeutics, says president and CEO Dr Mauritis Geerlings.

... AML

The MSKCC has already tested a bismuth-213 conjugate in a pilot study in a small number of patients with acute myeloid leukaemia (AML). It found that the conjugate was able to destroy large numbers of tumour cells without causing significant side-effects and the study has now been extended to include 29 patients.

Actinium plans to file an IND with the US FDA to conduct further trials of the conjugate in AML patients, Dr Geerlings said.

In preclinical studies, just a few atoms of the second isotope, actinium-225, were found to kill leukaemia, lymphoma, breast, ovarian, neuroblastoma and prostate cancer cells. Actinium plans to begin a Phase I study of actinium-225 in patients with AML next year.

The company gets the isotopes from the US Department of Energy's stored supply of unwanted nuclear defence material.

In order to guarantee the supply of bismuth-213 and actinium-225, Actinium is trying to secure a contract with the Department of Energy.

It should know whether it has won the contract by the middle of next year but is developing a different process to produce the isotopes as a backup plan, Dr Geerlings said.

Actinium Pharmaceuticals was established in 1993 in Virginia, US. For further information visit the company's website, www.pharmactinium.com, or phone +1 703 299 9755 or fax +1 703 299 9757.