



Pet sterilization work led to cancer research

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Esperance's cancer drugs, which supporters now believe might revolutionize treatment of the disease, began in the early 1990s as an effort to sterilize pets without surgery.

At the time, scientists William Hansel and Fred Enright hoped to develop a shot that could shut down a dog's reproductive system. The idea was to shut down cells in the pituitary gland that govern male and female reproductive organs.

The problem was the pituitary cells regenerated in a month or so.

"So like many great ideas, the initial part of the invention was meant for one thing, but then it evolved into something greater," Esperance President Hector W. Alila said.

Enright is head of veterinary science at the LSU Agriculture Center. Hansel, an animal physiologist, worked jointly with the center and the LSU Pennington Biomedical Research Center.

They were soon joined by Carola Leuschner, then a biochemist at Pennington and now a part of the Esperance team.

The researchers realized their approach could be adapted for cancer treatment.

Eventually they developed new molecules that attached to hormone receptors on cancer cells and disrupted the cell membranes.

On Thursday, Hansel jokingly described the research as "skunkworks" all the way.

Skunkworks is the work an organization tolerates but does not officially support, fund or even acknowledge it exists, Hansel said.

In fact, an organization doesn't want to admit it has anything to do with the work at all.

How else can one explain the Agriculture Center and Pennington, which focuses on nutrition, justifying cancer research and allowing that work to be done by a cancer research team with no cancer research experience, he asked.

In reality, the administrators at LSU, the center and Pennington deserved a lot of credit for Esperance's success, Hansel said.

The Agriculture Center paid the fees for patenting the process, and Pennington provided office and lab space.

Hansel also credited Gordon Kean, who provided more than \$1 million to fund the research, as the real hero in the Esperance story.