



Cancer drug nears testing

Local company on fast track to develop new treatment

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Baton Rouge-based Esperance Pharmaceuticals Inc. is within 15 to 18 months of testing to see if its targeted anticancer drug is safe for use in people.

Company officials made the announcement Thursday at a ceremony marking the opening of Esperance's headquarters and laboratories in the Louisiana Emerging Technology Center.

"We believe this is a major technical advance over what is being developed out there," company President Hector W. Alila said. "We are targeting specific molecules on the surface of cancer cells, and so our drug seeks out these cells and kills them."

Everyone who has seen a friend or relative go through cancer treatments says that there must be a better way, Alila said. Patients who go through chemotherapy frequently become nauseous, weak and lose their hair.

Esperance's drugs can destroy both the primary tumors and the cancer that spreads from them, he said.

The technology has the potential to develop more potent and safer drugs that target only cancer cells, leaving normal cells, and the patient, unharmed.

It's fitting that the company's name, Esperance, is French for hope, Alila said.

Esperance was founded on technology discovered and patented by scientists at the LSU Pennington Biomedical Research Center, the LSU Ag Center and LSU itself.

The company originally received backing from Louisiana Fund I LP of Baton Rouge.

Louisiana Fund I, Shreveport-based Themelios Venture Partners LP and Research Corporation Technologies Inc. of Tucson, Ariz., have provided \$9 million in Series A financing for Esperance.

Esperance is using the money to move one of its lead compounds to early clinical testing. Alila said the drug could be in Phase I testing, to see if it can be tolerated by people, within 15 to 18 months.

The Phase I testing will likely start with ovarian cancer, Alila said. The federal Food and Drug Administration considers ovarian cancer an “orphan” disease, meaning less than 200,000 people are diagnosed with the illness each year.

Because the potential market for an orphan drug is so small, the FDA offers incentives to developers, such as an accelerated review process, Alila said. Another key piece of Esperance’s strategy involves developing, and patenting, a diagnostic system that will help identify the patients who will likely respond to the drug.

This personalized medicine method offers Esperance some major advantages, Alila said. By choosing patients more apt to respond to the drug, Esperance will need fewer patients to prove its product works.

The result is that the company increases its chances for a successful clinical trial while lowering costs, he said. The Phase I trial will probably involve around 50 patients.

Once Esperance goes through the FDA review process, the company will be able to look at other potential applications, Alila said. So far, Esperance’s research has shown its drug has the potential to effectively treat breast, endometrial and colon cancers, among others.

Between now and its human trials, Esperance will be testing its treatment in animals, Alila said.

Alila said he appreciates the support the company has gotten locally, from Pennington, LSU and the Ag Center, and the help of technology developer William Hansel and his collaborators Fred Enright and Carola Leuschner.

In addition, Woman’s Hospital is providing Esperance with access to screen tissue samples from patients, he said.

Ross Barrett, Themelios managing general partner, said Esperance’s cancer treatment will have impacts far beyond Baton Rouge or Louisiana.

“This represents an opportunity for Louisiana to be a global thought leader in cancer therapeutics,” Barrett said.

Steven Grissom, deputy secretary of the Louisiana Department of Economic Development, said Esperance represents a clear signal that the state is taking the right steps in diversifying the economy.

Alila said the most important thing to come from Esperance, aside from the cancer treatment, may be to let the world know that Baton Rouge and Louisiana are good places to establish a biotech company.

The area has workers with the expertise needed, and much lower costs for lab and office space, he said. In Boston, running a company at Esperance's stage might cost \$1 million or even \$2 million a month.

"A million dollars goes like that," Alila said, snapping his fingers. "Every time you open the door, that's \$40,000."

The costs in Baton Rouge are far less than half of that, he said.