

Experimental skin-cancer drug shows promise

By Ken Alltucker

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An experimental cancer drug tested at Scottsdale Healthcare appears to shrink tumors in some skin-cancer patients without significant side effects, local researchers said.

The experimental drug GDC-0449 showed promise in a Phase 1 trial, but it must be tested in more advanced trials with a larger group of patients to gauge the drug's effectiveness, they added.

It was used to test patients with advanced basal-cell carcinoma, a rare type of skin cancer.

Basal-cell skin cancer is the most common type of cancer and is easily

treated if detected in time. But if the cancer spreads, it can be deadly and has no standard treatment therapy, said Dr. Daniel Von Hoff, an oncologist and chief scientific officer at Scottsdale Healthcare's Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center.

"We have something here that has very few side effects and substantial activity against advanced basal cell," said Von Hoff, who serves as physician-in-chief at the Translational Genomics Research Institute.

The trial drug helped shrink tumors in 18 of 33 patients treated. Some reported side effects such as hair and weight loss, and fatigue.

The drug works by attacking the cellular "hedgehog pathway" that

seem to activate with several cancers. The study's finding appeared Wednesday on the Web site of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Von Hoff said the drug's skin cancer experiment will be tested in a larger, Phase 2 clinical trial to evaluate the drug's effectiveness. He said it also is being studied for battling other forms of cancer, including a type of malignant brain tumor found in children.

The South San Francisco-based biotechnology company Genentech discovered the drug. A spokeswoman declined to say how much the company invested in the experiment, but said it expects to recruit 100 patients for the Phase 2 study.