

Researchers join for cancer-drug tests

Valley groups will conduct clinical trial for Calif. firm

By Ken Alltucker
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

A trio of Phoenix-area research and medical groups are teaming with a San Diego-based biotechnology company to test an experimental cancer drug that aims to prod a patient's immune system to fight the disease.

The Food and Drug Administration approved the launch of a Phase 1 clinical

trial that will be conducted at TGen Clinical Research Services at Scottsdale Healthcare and Mayo Clinic in Arizona.

The Phase 1 trial, also known as a first-in-human trial, will test whether the experimental drug known as "VTX-2337" is safe at various doses. If proven safe, researchers will launch a Phase 2 trial to test the drug's effectiveness.

"It looks like a promising approach," said Dr. Ramesh Ramanathan, medical director of TGen Clinical Research Services at Scottsdale Healthcare. "The study is open for patients with all types

of advanced cancer."

The trial points to Arizona's growing role as a research site for experimental cancer drugs with more than 30 early-stage clinical trials under way at TGen-Scottsdale Healthcare, Ramanathan said.

The researchers expect Phase 1 to last about a year. But it typically takes a drug several years to hit the market once it passes the FDA's rigorous standards.

Michael Kamdar, a founder and chief

See **CANCER** Page D2

Valley medical groups join cancer-drug clinical trial

CANCER

Continued from D1

business officer of biotechnology company VentiRx Pharmaceuticals, said his company raised about \$30 million for VTX-2337 trials and it selected the TGen-Scottsdale Healthcare team, in part, because of ties with Translational Genomics Research Institute's (TGen's) physician-in-chief, Dr. Daniel Von Hoff.

"Both Dan's reputation and his ability to drive early molecules forward with his team, that is important," Kamdar said.

The experimental drug is a molecule that researchers believe can stimulate the immune cells in the body and around a cancer tumor.

Scientists believe the drug will work by tricking the body's immune system into attacking the cancer, much as it would fight a bacterial infection. Bacterial infections tend to strike the body at a much more rapid clip than cancer, which is generally slower, so the immune system reacts more swiftly to fight bacteria.

"It mimics a bacterial signal in a way

that basically alerts the body about potentially something (life-threatening)," said Dr. Peter Cohen, a researcher at Mayo Clinic Arizona's hematology and oncology division.

Cohen, who recently joined Mayo from Cleveland Clinic, said scientists have long sought strategies to fight cancer through immunotherapy, and even some research has been remarkably similar to VentiRx's approach, albeit with one key difference.

Past research has tested "toll-like receptors 7 and 9" molecules, targets that have proven effective in mice but not humans, Cohen said.

This trial targets receptor 8 molecules, which has not been effective in mice, but researchers believe may work on humans.

Scientists envision using this experimental drug in tandem with standard cancer treatments to give the best chance of fighting the disease. Researchers are not limiting the type of cancer this may be effective against. VentiRx believes the experimental drug may also be used for respiratory and autoimmune disease.

Details

Interested in learning more about this clinical trial? Call Joyce Ingold of Scottsdale Healthcare at 480-323-1339.