

THE WALTER AND ELIZA HALL INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL RESEARCH (WEHI)

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WEHI enters research collaboration with Genentech to develop new cancer drugs

The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI) announced today that it has entered into an exclusive global collaboration agreement with the California-based biotech company Genentech, Inc. to discover, develop, manufacture and commercialise a new class of broad spectrum cancer therapeutics.

Under the terms of the agreement, Genentech will make upfront and research program payments with the further possibility of milestone and royalty payments in the future. The companies are not disclosing financial terms of the collaboration.

The agreement builds on basic scientific research carried out at WEHI over recent years, specifically regarding the therapeutic potential of regulating the activity of proteins that control the normal and healthy process of cell death called apoptosis.

“Every day, about 10 billion of our old and damaged cells die and are replaced by about 10 billion new cells,” says WEHI cancer researcher, Professor Jerry Adams. “This cell death process, known as apoptosis, is completely normal and, in fact, essential to our health. Sometimes, however, this process goes awry and inadvertently protects damaged cells from dying. When that happens, these rogue cells may multiply uncontrollably and give rise to tumours. Therefore, a drug that targets the apoptotic process, resulting in the targeted death of cancer cells may have great potential for therapy.”

Professor Adams explains, “Our research at WEHI has produced an encouraging series of small molecule drug candidates that we believe should stimulate apoptosis and aid cancer treatment. When we have a compound that shows activity in pre-clinical models, we hope to begin testing in patients, where there is a pressing need for improved and better-tolerated therapies.”

Professor Adams emphasizes that WEHI’s first priority is to ensure that cancer patients directly benefit from the results of their fundamental research, and this collaboration which combines WEHI’s world-class science with Genentech’s expertise in drug development, may support the development of lead compounds into effective anti-cancer drugs.

The research teams at WEHI also include those led by Professors Peter Colman, Suzanne Cory, Andreas Strasser and Drs David Huang, Keith Watson, Ian Street and Jonathan Baell.

Professor Adams is available for interview.

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