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ASIA EDITION

Senhwa Biosciences, NIH to co-develop COVID-19 drug

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The collaboration to evaluate the efficacy of Silmitasertib against coronavirus

Taiwan headquartered Senhwa Biosciences Inc announced that it has partnered with the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to evaluate the efficacy of a new drug, dubbed Silmitasertib, for treatment of COVID-19.

The drug, developed by Senhwa Biosciences to treat cancers, such as bile duct cancer, medulloblastoma and pediatric brain tumor, showed promise in human tests to curb the ribonucleic acid (RNA) virus from proliferating.

The efficacy of the drug is not yet assessed in Taiwan but US NIH to undertake efficacy testing of the same through clinical trials. The New Taipei City-based firm is willing to partner with other companies and provide its drugs for free.

Senhwa Biosciences CEO Soong Tai-sen said by telephone, "The company would offer the drug for free to the US agency during the tests, but it is difficult to forecast when the trials would be completed".

The University of California San Francisco's Quantitative Biosciences Institute last month identified 69 drugs or experimental compounds that might be effective in treating COVID-19, including the Silmitasertib. Silmitasertib marks the only CK2 inhibitor present in clinical trials, Soong said.

Silmitasertib could promote the formation of street granules by disrupting casein kinase 2, a protein kinase that performs diverse functions related to cell survival, thus preventing viruses from gaining ingredients such as nucleic acids to create a new virus.

"Silmitasertib offers two advantages. First, its safety has been proven during our previous tests on about 300 people for cancer treatment. And second, we have about 120kg of Simitasertib in storage in the US, which would be convenient in terms of delivery to the NIH," he said.

Given that Silmitasertib, unlike other potential new drugs under testing for COVID-19, such as remdesivir, does not directly attack the coronavirus or reduce lung damage, it is more likely to be used as a adjuvant drug, Soong said.

However, whether it would be effective and how it would be used with other medication would be determined by the NIH,

Soong said.

The drug is undergoing a few human tests, including a Phase II trial for bile duct cancer in Taiwan, the US and South Korea, a Phase II clinical trial for medulloblastoma, sponsored by the National Institute of Health-Cancer Therapy Evaluation Program and the Pediatric Brain Tumor Consortium, and a Phase I study for advanced basal cell carcinoma, it said.