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Singapore: US Food and Drug Administration has granted accelerated approval to Opdivo (nivolumab), marketed by Bristol-Myers Squibb, for patients with unresectable (cannot be removed by surgery) or metastatic (advanced) melanoma who no longer respond to other drugs.

Melanoma is the fifth most common type of cancer in the United States. It forms in the body's melanocyte cells, which develop the skin's pigment.

Opdivo works by inhibiting the PD-1 protein on cells, which blocks the body's immune system from attacking melanoma tumors. Opdivo is intended for patients who have been previously treated with ipilimumab and, for melanoma patients whose tumors express a gene mutation called BRAF V600, for use after treatment with ipilimumab and a BRAF inhibitor.

"Opdivo is the seventh new melanoma drug approved by the FDA since 2011," said Dr Richard Pazdur, director of the Office of Hematology and Oncology Products in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. "The continued development and approval of novel therapies based on our increasing understanding of tumor immunology and molecular pathways are changing the treatment paradigm for serious and life-threatening diseases."

Other FDA-approved treatments for melanoma include ipilimumab (2011), peginterferon alfa-2b (2011), vemurafenib (2011), dabrafenib (2013), trametinib (2013) and pembrolizumab (2014).