

AstraZeneca, Merck collaborate on cancer treatment

1 June 2009, By LINDA A. JOHNSON , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- AstraZeneca PLC and Merck & Co. said Monday they will jointly develop a pair of drugs meant to hit cancer with a one-two punch, part of a growing trend of combination cancer treatments.

The companies, two of the world's biggest drugmakers, said they will combine efforts with Merck's MK-2206 and AstraZeneca's AZD6244, both of which are still in very early development.

Such a partnership among major pharmaceutical companies on a combination treatment is unusual, normally occurring when each company has a drug either already on the market or in final human testing.

"This is really, really early," said analyst Steve Brozak of WBB Securities. "This is good news," as such partnerships can help produce the next generation of cancer drugs.

London-based [AstraZeneca](#) and Merck, of Whitehouse Station, N.J., said in a statement that by working together, they could bring the treatment to patients more quickly. They said pre-clinical studies - laboratory testing in cells and animals - indicate the combination has potential as an anticancer drug.

The drug candidates are currently in separate early-stage and midstage studies involving people. Under the deal, the companies will jointly evaluate the combination in a Phase I clinical trial. Development costs will be shared.

Decisions on further development will be based on the early-stage results.

Each drug targets a different protein that is abnormally activated in cancer, one called MEK and the other AKT.

"There is strong scientific rationale to suggest that the potential benefit to cancer patients of this

combination may far exceed the sum of the parts," Gary Gilliland, senior vice president of oncology at Merck Research Laboratories, said in a statement.

The early stages of drug development focus mainly on whether the compound is safe and can reach its intended target. They normally only involve a small number of patients. Results from later stages of development, involving many more patients, determine whether a treatment actually works, but cost far more money.

Brozak called the deal a consequence of industry consolidation, with companies that are merging or cutting costs having already reduced spending on administration and other areas.

"Now what they're trying to do is cut their research expenses by combining programs," he said.

AstraZeneca's AZD6244 is currently in midstage, or Phase II development, as a potential treatment for several tumor types. AstraZeneca licensed the compound from Boulder, Colo.-based Array BioPharma Inc. in 2003. It faced a setback in 2007 after failing a midstage study focusing on advanced skin [cancer](#).

Merck's MK-2206 is in early-stage studies focusing in general on treating solid tumors.

In U.S. trading Monday afternoon, [Merck](#) shares fell 37 cents, or 1.3 percent, to \$27.21, while AstraZeneca's U.S. shares rose 67 cents, or 1.6 percent, at \$42.39.

AP Business Writer Damian Troise in New York contributed to this report.
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