

FAU biotech spinoff doing first clinical trial

South Florida Business Journal - April 27, 2007

by [Brian Bandell](#)



Dr. Herbert Weissbach, director of the Center for Molecular Biology and Biotechnology at FAU, discovered the drug while studying aging effects.

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A drug developed at **Florida Atlantic University** in Boca Raton is being tested on South Florida patients as a potential way to remove pre-cancerous skin growths without damaging healthy skin.

The proof-of-concept study, which started this month, is the first clinical trial for **CHS Resources**, the biotechnology firm spun out of the discoveries by Dr. Herbert Weissbach, a distinguished research professor and director of **FAU's Center for Molecular Biology and Biotechnology**.

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As the university strives to be recognized for its life science research and attract biotech companies and scientists to Florida, the success of its spinoffs helps establish a bankable track record. The financial backers include Dr. Elliot Hahn, who was chairman of Davie-based generic drug maker Andrx Corp. before it was sold last year.

The market CHS Resources aims for is the 1.3 million patients in the United States diagnosed each year with the precancerous skin growth called actinic keratoses. These red or brown, scaly patches are caused by overexposure to the sun and can become cancerous.

These growths are usually treated by being burned or frozen off - two procedures that could leave a scar - or with one of several available drug creams.

Solaraze was the last major drug approved to treat actinic keratoses, but it has not captured a big market share because it is expensive, has a long treatment time and is not consistently effective, said Dr. Robert Bader, a Deerfield Beach dermatologist who practices at North

Broward Medical Center.

The most important qualities of a new drug for this condition would be a high rate of long-term success, a short treatment length and competitive cost, he added.

"A lot of these drugs have pros and cons," CHS Resources CEO and President Steve Chakoff said. "There's no question the big advantage for us is the cosmetic potential here."

Chakoff said the drug has yet to be named and declined to reveal the chemicals comprising its compound. Weissbach said it is a combination of an anti-inflammatory agent and an oxidizing agent that kills cancer cells without harming normal cells.

If it works, it would be a big accomplishment, because most cancer treatments damage healthy parts of the body.

AN UNEXPECTED FIND

The scientist was not looking for a cancer cure when he made the discovery. Weissbach was studying the oxidation damage - the loss of electrons and atoms from molecules - that occurs in aging. He found an anti-inflammatory agent that, when combined in a flask with a moderate dose of an oxidizing agent, the cancerous cells were killed while the normal cells were unharmed.

He tested it against skin cancer, colon cancer and lung cancer - and found it similarly effective.

"There are no reasons to believe that the concentrations we're using would be harmful at all [to patients]," said Weissbach, who is an unpaid scientific advisor for CHS Resources, but could share royalty payments with FAU if his drug is successful.

After licensing the compound from the university and Weissbach, the investors decided to target actinic keratoses because getting Food and Drug Administration approval for it would likely be faster than for a cancerous condition, Chakoff said. The founding investors put about \$100,000 into the company, and he estimated it would take at least \$15 million and five years to get approval for its drug.

The first step is the company's six-month clinical trial with a local dermatologist who will treat 15 patients. Chakoff hopes for positive results to show potential investors in the next round of CHS Resources' funding.

"Whoever is going to invest in company will know they're not coming in at such an early stage that it's extremely risky," he said. "It puts us in position to have higher valuation after the proof-of-concept clinical study."

bbandell@bizjournals.com | (954) 949-7515