18/09/2000

HKUST and Geron Collaborate on Drug Discovery

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) announced today (18 September 2000) the signing of a Material Supply and Collaboration Agreement with the San Francisco based biotechnology company, Geron Corporation. The collaboration will focus on the discovery of drug leads for cancer and age-related diseases using Geron's proprietary telomerase technology platform. The University's Biotechnology Research Institute (BRI) will support and conduct the research aspects of the collaboration.

Given the importance of telomerase and BRI's expertise in TCMs, this collaboration marks a strong marriage between two complementary technologies. "BRI has strategically partnered with Geron in order to utilize the University's existing state-of-the-art drug screening capabilities to focus on the identification of small molecule modulators of telomerase that possess the potential for commercial drug development. Such a drug could well prove to be a blockbuster therapeutic in making a significant contribution to global healthcare," said Professor Nancy Ip, Director of BRI.

Hi-res image Prof Tony Eastham (left), Acting Vice-President for Research and Development, and Dr Thomas Okarma, CEO of Geron Corporation, shake hands after signing the agreement.

As cells age, the DNA sequences at the ends of each chromosome become shorter with every cellular division, a phenomenon known as telomere shortening. Scientists have shown that this phenomenon can be attributed to a loss of telomerase activity. In comparison, cancer cells do not experience a telomere shortening because they possess high levels of telomerase activity. In this light, the ability to modulate telomerase activity would have enormous applications for treating cancers and other age-related disease.

Under the agreement, HKUST is granted a non-exclusive technology transfer of Geron's proprietary methodology for the identification of telomerase activity in various biological samples. Utilizing a systematic, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) based approach, BRI researchers plan to screen selected TCM extracts for their ability to modulate telomerase activity. The wealth of clinical data available with respect to TCMs make them the ideal platform for the discovery of active compounds against validated drug targets including telomerase. Such rationale drug screening approaches are highly likely to generate drug leads with telomerase modulation activity. In addition to upfront fees to support the research activities of the collaboration, Geron will pay HKUST undisclosed milestone and royalty payments based upon the successful development and commercialization of drugs in the field of telomerase therapeutics as well as another undisclosed application.

Established in 1990 with a sizable contribution from The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, the Biotechnology Research Institute identifies and engages in biotechnology opportunities that promise to impact the development of a local biotechnology industry.

Geron is a biopharmaceutical company with a market capitalization approaching US$ 700 million. The Company's research and development efforts are directed at the commercial development of therapeutic and diagnostic products for applications in oncology, drug discovery, and regenerative medicine. Geron's product development interests are aligned with their three proprietary core technologies: telomerase, human pluripotent stem cells and nuclear transfer. In

terms of telomerase, the company holds over 40 key patents and it is thus in an excellent strategic position to commercialize their discoveries.