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Merck, AstraZeneca sign deal for cancer drug therapy

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Singapore: Merck and AstraZeneca entered into a licensing agreement for Merck's oral small molecule inhibitor of WEE1 kinase (MK-1775). MK-1775 is currently being evaluated in phase IIa clinical studies in combination with standard-of-care therapies for the treatment of patients with certain types of ovarian cancer. The agreement is contingent on expiration or termination of the waiting period under the Hart Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvement Act.

WEE1 helps to regulate the cell-division cycle. The WEE1 inhibitor MK-1775 is designed to cause certain tumor cells to divide without undergoing normal DNA repair processes, ultimately leading to cell death. Preclinical evidence suggests that the combination of MK-1775 and DNA damage-inducing chemotherapy agents can enhance anti-tumor properties, in comparison to chemotherapy alone.

Under the terms of the agreement, AstraZeneca will pay Merck a $50 million upfront fee. In addition Merck will be eligible to receive future payments tied to development and regulatory milestones, plus sales-related payments and tiered royalties. AstraZeneca will be responsible for all future clinical development, manufacturing and marketing.

Dr Susan Galbraith, head, oncology innovative medicines unit, AstraZeneca, said that, "MK-1775 is a strong addition to AstraZeneca's growing oncology pipeline, which already includes a number of inhibitors of the DNA damage response. The compound has demonstrated encouraging clinical efficacy data and we intend to study it in a range of cancer types where there is a high unmet medical need."

Mr Iain D Dukes, senior vice president and head, licensing and external scientific affairs, Merck, said that, "Merck is committed to advancing potentially meaningful therapeutic options promptly for patients with cancer. We are pleased to enter this agreement with AstraZeneca to realize the potential of MK-1775 while we focus on advancing our later stage oncology programs, MK-3475 and vintafolide."