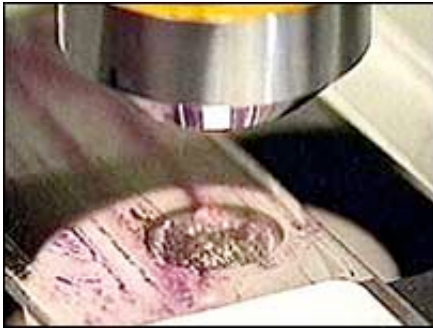

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Friday, 9 July, 2004, 23:51 GMT 00:51 UK

Mint leaf starves cancer to death



An extract found in the leaves of a mint-like Chinese herb could be used to fight cancer, researchers say.

A drug based on the extract of *Scutellaria barbata* works by destroying the blood vessels supplying tumours.

It should have fewer side effects than conventional treatments which attack healthy cells as well as cancerous cells, say the researchers.

Professor Alan McGown and colleagues at the University of Salford hope to test the drug in cancer patients soon.

The drug has so far been tested in the laboratory on human cancer cells from tumours such as breast and lung cancers.

Death by starvation

It works by attacking the tumour's blood vessels, starving the cancer to death by blocking its supply of oxygen and nutrients.

Co-researcher Dr Sylvie Ducki said: "If you target the vessels you are stopping the 'food' getting to the tumour and the tumour from spreading."

She said their drug was very selective - targeting only tumour vessels and leaving blood vessels supplying healthy tissues alone.

"Conventional treatments usually target tumour cells but also the normal cells. This causes a lot of side effects.

" This sounds very exciting "

Dr Graham Cowling from the Paterson Institute for Cancer Research

"Ours is so selective for just tumour vessels it did not attack normal blood vessels.

"We think we would be able to avoid a lot of the nasty side effects that conventional treatments have," she said.

The scientists work for a charity called KidsCan, which was set up by the University of Salford to

fund research into new treatments for childhood cancers.

The team are hoping to secure more funding to test the drug in patients over the next few years.

Patient trials

Professor McGown said: "Clearly we have much work to do before this treatment can be evaluated in patients. However, this area of research is very exciting.

"All cancers require a blood supply if they are to survive and grow. If we can target and destroy these blood vessels, then we will have a treatment that will be applicable to all forms of cancer both in children and adults."

Dr Graham Cowling, from the Paterson Institute for Cancer Research in Manchester, said: "This sounds very exciting.

"There are a number of drugs being developed which work on a similar mechanism but they are all slightly different.

"The modern approach is to combine drugs together to get even better effects. The more drugs we can get into clinical trials the better.

"We look forward to it progressing on through to the next stage," he said.

A spokeswoman for Cancer Research UK said: "Scutellaria barbata has long been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat several illnesses including some cancers.

"So, this finding is very interesting and the active ingredients of the plant should definitely be investigated further."

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