

Media Release

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New pancreatic cancer research to be focus for Curtin

Funding provided by Avner Pancreatic Cancer Foundation will enable Curtin University researchers to investigate drug combinations which they hope will ultimately lead to more effective and less toxic treatments for patients with pancreatic cancer.

Lead researcher Professor Marco Falasca from the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute (CHIRI) said Curtin researchers recently discovered a new drug combination which was able to increase threefold the life of mice with pancreatic cancer, and the new project aims to build upon these findings.

“Recently we discovered that a protein belonging to the G protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) family promotes pancreatic cancer growth,” Professor Falasca said.

“Our preliminary data demonstrates that by specifically inhibiting GPCR, in combination with a drug used in therapy, it is possible to substantially increase survival rates in mice that spontaneously develop pancreatic cancer.

“Our plan is to identify more potent drug combinations to treat pancreatic cancer and also identify new markers that will enable pancreatic cancer to be diagnosed earlier.”

Researchers will study the molecules and signalling pathways which are responsible for Pancreatic Ductal Adenocarcinoma (PDAC) – the most common (around 90 per cent) form of pancreatic cancer – progression. They hope this will make tumours more responsive to chemotherapies and ultimately block or reduce cancer growth.

“If we validate a lipid metabolite (which we recently found to be released by pancreatic cancer cells) as a pancreatic cancer biomarker, this could allow early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and consequently save many lives,” Professor Falasca said.

“This is a novel approach since we will be testing a compound contained in cannabis to see if it can treat PDAC. This compound is already being used to treat other diseases, as far as we know it has never been tested on pancreatic cancer.”

Pancreatic cancer is an aggressive disease with an extremely high mortality rate, mainly because it does not present any symptoms in its early stages and is highly resistant to chemotherapy.

Ms Caroline Kelly, CEO and Co-Founder of the Avner Pancreatic Cancer Foundation, said she was proud to be supporting Professor Falasca and the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute in research that may ultimately improve survival rates for people with pancreatic cancer.

“Pancreatic cancer has one of the lowest survival rates with a five-year survival rate of just seven per cent and a median survival between three and six months,” Ms Kelly said.

“Avner Pancreatic Cancer Foundation is driven to double the number of pancreatic cancer survivors by 2020 and supporting research projects such as this is the best way to achieve this goal.

“We are excited to be working with Professor Falasca on this promising new project and eagerly await the results.”

The research is being done in collaboration with Baker IDI Institute, Barts Cancer Institute QMUL, University of Chieti.

The project will commence in 2017 and will run for approximately three years.

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Contact:

Amanda Lewis, Media Consultant, Curtin University

Tel: (08) 9266 3357

Web: <http://news.curtin.edu.au/media-centre/>

Email: amanda.lewis@curtin.edu.au

Twitter: [@CurtinMedia](https://twitter.com/CurtinMedia)

Susanna Wolz, Media Relations Manager, Curtin University

Tel: (08) 9266 9085

Mobile: 0401 103 877

Web: <http://news.curtin.edu.au/media-centre/>

Email: susanna.wolz@curtin.edu.au

Twitter: [@CurtinMedia](https://twitter.com/CurtinMedia)

Caroline Kelly, CEO and Co-Founder, Avner Pancreatic Cancer Foundation

Mobile: 0415 503 971

Email: caroline@avnersfoundation.org.au