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Page: 28

Geelong drug researcher awarded after becoming first to seek drug approval in the United States, PETER FARAGO reports

Cancer break in drug award

GEELONG cancer drug researcher Dr Greg Collier has been gonged by Australia's biotechnology industry.

Dr Collier, who is chief executive officer of Geelong-headquartered Chemgenex Pharmaceuticals, was awarded the AusBiotech 2009 Chairman's Excellence Award for an outstanding contribution by an individual within a company.

Dr Collier has played a significant role internationally and domestically in promoting Australia's leadership in biotechnology development and commercialisation.

Under his leadership, Chemgenex this year became the first Australian company to submit a new drug application to the US Food and Drug Administration for a cancer medicine.

Chemgenex has submitted an application for Omapro (omacetaxine mepesuccinate) for the treatment of patients with chronic myeloid leukaemia who have failed treatment with the drug imatinib and who have developed a T315I mutation.

Patients with this mutation do not respond to existing therapies and in clinical trials Omapro has been shown to be effective in 85 per cent of patients which chronic phase CML.

Chemgenex also recently discovered in preclinical testing that Omapro kills human leukaemic stem cells – a significant development with research showing stem cells appear to fuel the growth of several kids of cancers, including leukaemia and are resistant to standard cancer therapy.

With stem cell therapies being hailed by many as the silver bullet in cancer treatment, this discovery is an interesting development for the company and expands potential new and wide-ranging avenues for the use of Omapro.

Earlier this year, Dr Collier told the *Geelong Advertiser* that, although the drug has been developed in the United States, winning approval for the drug would be a coup for the Geelong-based company.

"For a small drug company based in Geelong we're going to launch this drug ourselves. This is a big coup for us and a first for the biotech sector to do that," Dr Collier said.

"We bought this drug in an early stage in California about five years ago so we've been very entrepreneurial and opportunistic and looked at options all around the world.

"It shows you can build a globally competitive company in the pharmaceutical industry and own a drug 100 per cent and launch a drug out of a company based in Geelong."

BIG TIME: Chemgenex Pharmaceuticals chief executive Dr Greg Collier after winning a national biotechnology award yesterday.