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Cancer drug to be studied in Wichita

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A cancer drug trial getting under way in Wichita shows the role Kansas can play in the development of new drugs and other medical advances, officials said Tuesday.

Nanotax is the first cancer drug to undergo a Phase I clinical trial in Wichita, under the oversight of the Cancer Center of Kansas. It has been involved in Phase II and Phase III cancer drug trials for years.

Phase I trials of Nanotax began a year ago in Kansas City, at the University of Kansas Cancer Center. Together, the two sites will enroll 21 patients.

Phase I trials study effectiveness for drugs and possible side effects.

The expansion of the study to Wichita is the result of collaboration by the Cancer Center of Kansas; KU; the Kansas Bioscience Authority, which is providing \$500,000 in funding for infrastructure; and Critech, the Kansas company producing the drug.

Nanotax is a reformulation of a commonly used chemotherapy drug, broken down into a nanoparticle form that allows it to be administered with fewer side effects. It is being studied in ovarian cancer patients for whom other therapies have not worked.

The expansion was announced at a news conference Tuesday at the KU School of Medicine-Wichita.

Kansas Board of Regents chairwoman Jill Docking said the partnership makes the newest cancer drugs available to many more Kansans — through the Cancer Center of Kansas' 15 offices — and shows the potential this part of the state has in finding cancer cures.

Roy Jensen, director of the KU Cancer Center, called the trial expansion "a critically important milestone" for the state.

Nanotax is KU's first "bench to bedside" drug. The technology that created it was discovered by KU researchers. Critech is a biotechnology firm spun off from KU; it patented the drug, produced it and designed the protocol that will help determine the optimal dose for patients.

Sam Campbell, chairman and president of Critech, said the drug could someday be licensed to a pharmaceutical company that would take it to market, a process that requires "enormous amounts of money."

Gearing up for a Phase I trial also can be expensive, said Wichita oncologist Shaker Dakhil, president of the Cancer Center of Kansas. It required adding a minus-80-degrees freezer, space for it and staffing to administer the drug and track study data.

It's "much more intensive" research than required in Phase II and III trials, he said. "You have to be very meticulous."

Tom Thornton, president and CEO of the Kansas Bioscience Authority, said the trial should help KU in its quest to be designated a Comprehensive Cancer Center by the federal National Cancer Institute.

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