

Drug trials given healthy cash boost

By Christopher Adams
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Frank Sieg (left) and Aki von Roy have a \$650,000 grant for CuroNZ's multiple sclerosis drug. Photo / Dean Purcell

A New Zealand biotechnology firm says a capital injection from the United States will allow the company to move on to the next stage of trials of a potentially life-changing multiple sclerosis drug.

Auckland-based CuroNZ has received US\$540,000 (\$650,000) from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in the US, which will fund pre-clinical studies on the use of Neural Regeneration Peptides (NRPs) to treat the central nervous disorder that affects 2.5 million sufferers worldwide.

The company was founded in 2009 by scientist Frank Sieg, who began working on the development of NRPs in Germany well over a decade ago.

Sieg said naturally occurring NRPs were the main driver of changes in brain matter.

High doses of synthetically produced NRPs had been shown to repair damage caused to the brain by MS and had the potential to completely halt the progression of the illness, he said.

CuroNZ's executive chairman, Aki von Roy, said the funding was a big vote of confidence in the drug's potential as the society didn't invest in "simple concepts".

"They invest in potential products that will help or may help MS sufferers on a global scale," von Roy said, adding that the company may get another US\$540,000 from the society if "all goes well" in the pre-clinical trials.

Sieg said mice and dogs would be used in the pre-clinical study, before the company moved on in the latter part of next year to Phase I clinical trials with humans, that would assess the safety of NRPs.

Further trials would be required to prove the efficacy of the drug in the treatment of MS.

Von Roy said the treatment would require US Food and Drug Administration approval. It would be at least 2020 before it could hit the market.

The global MS market was worth about US\$15 billion annually but only 45 per cent of patients were currently treatable, as there was no treatment available for progressive MS, he said.

"Fifty-five per cent of patients are untreatable - that's the patient population we're targeting."

Von Roy said there was potential for NRPs to be used to treat other diseases, including Parkinson's, as well as victims of strokes and spinal injuries.

MS - causes unknown and no cure

Northland woman Donna Rogers said she woke up one morning with numbness and tingling on one side from her head to her toes and thought she was having a heart attack.

An MRI scan revealed what Rogers thought looked like "marshmallow" syndrome - white puffy clusters around the brain.

It was multiple sclerosis, a disease of the central nervous system of unknown causes, no cure and a huge variety of symptoms.

" depends on what part of the central nervous system that MS is attacking - you just don't know," said Rogers, president of the Northland Multiple Sclerosis Society.

For her, the symptoms have continued along the same lines as those experienced that morning in May 2007.

"If you can imagine having a really hot spa and then jumping into a really cold pool. It's like that - pins and needles in my head and down my body - and it normally hits me quite hard."

- *APN News & Media*

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