

Pfizer's Cambridge stem cell collaboration focuses on eye disease



News - Life Sciences

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Friday, 24 April 2009 12:40

Pfizer's Cambridge regenerative medicine operation has embarked on a landmark collaboration with UCL to develop a treatment for certain forms of blindness using stem cell therapy, a deal that also has huge implications for the wider stem cell industry.

With the world's largest pharmaceutical reportedly promising to pump £50m into stem cell research over the next three to five years and the new US administration finally opening the door on the discipline, stem cell therapy is finally coming of age.

It is the first major investment by a leading pharmaceutical into stem cell and comes six months after Pfizer Regenerative Medicine opened a facility in Cambridge, UK, to lead its charge into the stem cell industry.

Professor Pete Coffey, from the UCL (University College London) Institute for Ophthalmology, said: "We have not only the benefit of Pfizer's experience of the regulatory process and their expertise in stem cell technology but the ability, if this works, to produce on a much larger scale.

"It has huge implications, not only for our project, but for the field of regenerative medicine as a whole. And it is great that Britain is at the forefront of this research."

The collaboration and license agreement is focused on gaining better understanding into how to develop stem cell-based therapies for certain ophthalmic conditions.

Pfizer's contributions will include expertise in the design and execution of clinical studies and interaction with global regulators as well as in product manufacturing techniques.

"We are excited to be working with pioneers in the field of stem cell ophthalmology from UCL," said Ruth McKernan, chief scientific officer at Pfizer Regenerative Medicine. "While we have much to learn about how stem cells can be used therapeutically, we are confident that this relationship will increase that understanding and help us advance to a time when our work may benefit patients worldwide."

The collaboration will examine how human embryonic stem (hES) cells differentiate into retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) with the goal of developing stem cell-based therapies primarily for wet and dry macular degeneration (AMD).

In a national radio interview, McKernan said that Pfizer intended to invest \$100m in stem cells over the next three to five years, though she wouldn't say how much was being invested into the UCL collaboration.

Under the terms of the agreement, Pfizer will provide funding to UCL to enable research into the development of stem cell-based therapies for AMD as well as other retinal diseases.

Pfizer is granted exclusive worldwide rights to develop and commercialize an RPE stem cell-based therapeutic in the ophthalmology field. After the completion of preclinical safety studies, Pfizer will have the option to conduct clinical trials to determine efficacy of treatment and commercialize any resulting product.

