

Bristol-Myers pitches its cancer medicine pipeline

June 6 2011, By LINDA A. JOHNSON , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. executives said Monday they have more than a half-dozen drugs in testing against different cancers and could get important data on them and possibly a couple of approvals this year.

Three of those already are on the market for at least one use, the newest being [skin cancer](#) drug Yervoy.

Yervoy was approved in the U.S. in March for advanced melanoma, the deadliest type of skin cancer, in patients who have failed on another therapy. European regulators recently gave it a positive review, so it should get approved there soon. It works by stimulating the immune system rather than killing cells, as older [cancer drugs](#) do.

Bristol's head of [cancer research](#), Dr. Renzo Canetta, told analysts at the American Society of Clinical Oncology conference in Chicago that Yervoy's success shows such targeted immune therapies will become a standard part of [cancer treatment](#).

The finding "proves the principle that immunotherapy has a role, not only in melanoma but in other tumor types," Canetta told analysts during a webcast.

He said Bristol-Myers is aiming to become a leader in immune-based cancer treatments. It has been testing Yervoy against [prostate cancer](#) and [lung cancer](#) in combination with other treatments, and has five other,

experimental immunological cancer compounds in early- to late-stage human testing.

A study testing Yervoy in newly diagnosed patients with advanced, or metastatic, melanoma, was presented at the conference Sunday and found the injected drug extended life. Among patients who got Yervoy combined with the current standard of care, a cell-killing drug called dacarbazine, 21 percent were alive after three years, compared with 12 percent for those getting dacarbazine alone.

"We rarely use the word cure in metastatic disease," Canetta said, but some patients getting Yervoy have now been followed for four years or more. "We will need even more follow-up to use this word with confidence."

Citi Investment Research analyst John Boris noted that tolerability of Yervoy was an issue in the study, due to side effects including liver inflammation. But he wrote to investors that he expects Yervoy to become "the backbone therapy" for advanced melanoma and to produce \$1.5 billion in worldwide sales in 2015, more if it also gets approved for prostate and lung cancer.

Among the other immunologic drugs, elotuzumab is probably the farthest along, with a final-stage study under way in patients with multiple myeloma, or bone marrow cancer.

A cloned antibody-based drug, it works by binding to a protein common on cancerous bone marrow cells but not on normal, healthy ones. Multiple myeloma is the second-most prevalent bone cancer, with about 40,000 new cases in the U.S. and Europe each year.

Another antibody-based compound, identified only as "anti-PD1," will soon begin midstage testing for solid tumors, starting with kidney

tumors. It appears to work well in combination with Yervoy, according to the company.

Three other compounds in earlier stages of testing work by stimulating T-cells or other parts of the immune system as they bind to substances on cancer cells.

Bristol-Myers also is researching possible additional uses for Sprycel, which is approved for chronic myeloid leukemia, and Erbitux, approved for head and neck cancers.

And the company expects new data on research on brivanib, later this year on tests against liver cancer, and next year on tests against colorectal cancer. Bristol-Myers plans to apply for U.S. and European approval next year.

In early afternoon trading, Bristol-Myers shares fell 6 cents to \$27.92 per share, as the broader U.S. markets all dipped.

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