

Pfizer says it could be leader in cancer with many new drugs

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This product image provided by Pfizer shows packaging for its newest drug, breast cancer medicine Ibrance, now being tested against multiple other cancers. Edward Jones analyst Ashtyn Evans thinks by 2020 Pfizer could boost its cancer

drug sales to about 10 percent of revenue, up from barely 4 percent of its \$50 billion in annual revenue now. (Pfizer via AP)

Drug giant Pfizer is starting 20 clinical trials this year and more soon after on treatments to conquer cancer as it also seeks to gain leadership in one of the hottest, and most lucrative, areas of medicine.

A decade ago, the world's second-biggest drugmaker by revenue wasn't even a player in cancer medicine. Instead, it was known for erectile dysfunction treatment Viagra and blockbuster cholesterol fighter Lipitor.

New York-based Pfizer Inc. then chose to make cancer one of its core research areas, pitting it against cancer powerhouses including Novartis AG, Roche Holding AG, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. and Merck & Co.

Today, Pfizer has eight approved cancer medicines, four of them launched in the last four years. It's running late-stage patient tests on five of those drugs for additional uses, has three other drugs in late-stage testing—usually the last round before seeking regulators' approval—and has 14 other drug programs in early stages.

Those programs together provide for a two-pronged attack on cancer, including tumor-killing drugs and treatments in the promising new class called immuno-oncology that stimulate the immune system to mount a stronger defense against cancer.

Scientists "have never been closer to finding a cancer cure," Mikael Dolsten, Pfizer's head of worldwide research and development, told journalists Tuesday during an update on the company's cancer research strategy.

"Compared to other companies, we are uniquely positioned to be a leader" in cancer, Dolsten added.

He and other Pfizer executives said that's because killing tumors and preventing cancer recurrence requires regimens of multiple drugs given together or sequentially, and the company has many drugs that work by different mechanisms to try together.

"They clearly have the scale and R&D experience over time to be a major player in the immuno-oncology market," said Edward Jones analyst Ashtyn Evans. "We've seen them do a lot in a short time."

"They're still pretty far behind Merck and Bristol in immuno-oncology," she added, "but it's going to be a large market that will have room for multiple players."

Evans said Pfizer's best prospect is its newest drug, breast cancer medicine Ibrance, now being tested against multiple other cancers. She thinks by 2020 Pfizer could boost its cancer drug sales to about 10 percent of revenue, up from barely 4 percent of its \$50 billion in annual revenue now.

Asked about the high prices for cancer medicines, given that patients receive multiple treatments, Liz Barrett, head of cancer drug marketing, told reporters Pfizer will be looking at pricing for combinations of its drugs and noted the company gives away billions of dollars of its medicines.

Patients and insurance plans increasingly are raising alarms about prices of around \$100,000 a year for new drugs for cancer and some other conditions, plus recent huge price hikes for some old drugs. Now Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, the Vermont senator, have made them campaign issues with proposals to

let Americans buy cheaper drugs overseas, bring the federal government bigger discounts on drugs it buys and even make insurance plans cap what patients pay for their medication.

Pfizer's scientists now are collaborating more internally and have numerous partnerships with university researchers uncovering scientific insights and with other pharmaceutical and biotech companies, said Mace Rothenberg, a senior vice president who oversees Pfizer's efforts to discover potential cancer treatments.

Those partnerships range from one with iTeos Therapeutics giving Pfizer rights to two compounds in laboratory testing to one testing rival Merck's immuno-oncology drug Keytruda with two approved Pfizer drugs and an experimental one.

Dolsten and other Pfizer executives said the key to better treatments is putting together the best targeted drug combinations and, before testing them in people, seeing how well they work on animals manipulated to have tumors with the same genetic variations as the patients they're hoping to help.

Pfizer's cancer research programs include ones using six different types of technology to target tumor cells, from genetically engineered antibodies to therapeutic vaccines, which use patients' own tumor cells to create vaccines personalized to the genetic characteristics of their cancer.

Some of those programs are creating pills and antibody-based injected drugs that fight tumors by attacking "networks" within them that involve tumor metabolism, signaling and changes in gene function caused by external factors.

Pfizer also is developing several immuno-oncology treatments, including

pills, injected drugs and therapeutic vaccines. Pfizer already has five such compounds in patient testing and expects to start testing in another five next year.

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