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Prostate cancer test close to market

City firm's product could reduce number of biopsies

By Larry Kusch

A Winnipeg biotech company says it is close to marketing a test for prostate cancer that could greatly reduce the number of biopsies performed on men each year.

Miraculins Inc. has found three proteins or protein fragments that are markers in detecting the disease, which kills thousands of Canadians each year.

Michael Coutts, director of business development for Miraculins, said the company could be marketing a urine test — possibly in the form of a kit — in the next year or two.

"It's not sort of an airy fairy, pie-in-the-sky type of idea. It's something that can be achieved in a reasonable amount of time," Coutts said in an interview.

Miraculins is one of a cluster of local biotech companies supported by Genesys Venture Inc., a local life sciences firm founded by bio-entrepreneur Dr. Albert Friesen that helps establish and build biotech companies.

It has five cancer detection products in development, but the prostate cancer project is closest to market.

Coutts said there is interest in medical circles in developing a better screening process for prostate cancer.

Miraculins is one of several companies and research centres throughout North America that are working on an improved test. The potential North American market for such a test is hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

The current screening standard is the prostate specific antigen (PSA) blood test, but Miraculins says that test can-

not reliably distinguish between an enlarged prostate and cancer.

In the United States, 25 million PSA tests are performed each year and one million men undergo a prostate biopsy based upon elevated levels of PSA.

Coutts said a significant number of these procedures — perhaps 75 per cent — could be avoided if a more accurate test were available. A biopsy costs about \$1,500, while a urine test would cost a tiny fraction of that amount.

Among the companies working on a better test is Toronto-based ChondroGene Ltd., which presented its research a few months ago to the American Society of Clinical Oncology annual meeting in Atlanta.

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Miraculins president Jim Charlton acknowledges that the field is "fairly competitive," but he said the company is not panicked and believes it is making good progress in developing a marketable product.

"We will probably have all of our R & D work completed by the end of this year and be looking to find a marketing partner to take it through (the) regulatory (process) and market it," Charlton said.

The company expects to file its patent within a month.

He said the time it takes to get its prostate cancer test on the market will depend on the form the product takes and what claims the company makes for it.

Those decisions will be made in consultation with a future marketing partner.

Miraculins would seek some upfront money from that partner — a major diagnostic or marketing company — and would probably eventually receive royal-

ties of 10 to 20 per cent of net sales, Charlton said.

Miraculins has not published a scientific paper on its discovery, but it presented some early research to a medical conference in Philadelphia last fall, Coutts said.

It has conducted two studies in co-operation with the Winnipeg Clinic, Victoria General Hospital and a clinic in Edmonton comparing bodily fluids of prostate cancer sufferers with cancer-free men.

In the first, it identified several proteins or markers for detecting the disease.

In the second study, involving 180 patients, it was able to "validate" or confirm three markers that it is using in developing a commercial test for the disease.

"We're still working at understanding those markers better before we do any sort of scientific disclosures," Coutts said.

The publicly traded company (TSX-V:MOM) didn't want to speculate on potential sales for its forthcoming prostate cancer test.

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