Biogen will test newly developed interferon

By Harold Stern

Biogen, a Cambridge-based pharmaceutical company, announced it has begun the first tests of gamma interferon, a drug produced through use of recombinant DNA on humans in Switzerland.

Biogen must follow federal guidelines on genetics research and also comply with a 1983 Cambridge ordinance regarding the use of recombinant DNA technology in the city.

The ordinance established the Cambridge Biotechnological Committee (CBC), whose purpose is "overseeing all use of recombinant DNA in the City of Cambridge." All institutions wishing to use recombinant DNA must obtain a permit from the Commissioner of Health and Hospitals and the approval of the CBC.

Clinical trials for gamma interferon are scheduled to start later this year in the United States. Dr. Walter Gilbert, chairman of Biogen, said, "As it is a natural protein normally produced by white blood cells, gamma interferon has the potential of being safer than many of the chemotherapeutic agents currently in use.

The problem with many of the present drugs, he explained, is that they are unable to discriminate between cancer cells and rapidly growing normal cells. This causes many dangerous side effects, including vomiting, risk of infection, and damage to the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys.

Gamma interferon should inhibit cancer cell growth and also could possibly kill tumor cells and act against viral infection. Cancer patients, who often have a low resistance to infection, could benefit significantly from this effect.

Gamma interferon has been, in currently completed tests, significantly more effective than alpha interferon, Gilbert said. Alpha interferon will be marketed in 1984 by Biogen's licensee, the Schering Corporation, according to Gilbert.

Biogen is not claiming that gamma interferon is a cure for cancer, said Peter Feinstein, vice president of the company. "If you take a cancer that's ninety percent fatal, or one hundred percent fatal, and if you can get a ten percent or a twenty percent cure rate, or extend a life for a year, then that's a significant pharmaceutical," he said.

The company will use volunteers to determine the effectiveness of the drug and to find any possible side effects. The volunteers will be people who have had all the normal treatments for cancer, Feinstein said.

"We must make sure it's non-toxic, and we must prove that the drug helps," he continued. Later tests will determine proper dosages, and further studies will attempt to give additional information about the effectiveness and safety of the new drug, Feinstein said. The tests will take approximately three to four years to complete, and the approval of national regulatory agencies will take another year, he said.

Rich McKennen, a spokesman for Cambridge Mayor Alfred E. Vellucci's office, explained that "Biogen is regulated by the city. "They can't do anything until they go to the CBC. They must explain the type of research to be done, and the city has the right to inspect the facilities," McKennen said, however, he was unsure whether any inspections have actually been made.

All salaries and expenses of the staff of the CBC will be paid for among the institutions holding permits under the DNA technology ordinance.

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