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A new drug to prevent the rejection of transplanted organs has been successfully used on more than 100 patients at the University of Pittsburgh, according to researchers.

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The drug, which is still in the experimental phase, has n't been approved yet by the Food and Drug Administration, and its long-term effects are unknown.

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But researchers say the drug, called FK-506, could revolutionize the transplantation field by reducing harmful side effects and by lowering rejection rates.

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Rejection has been the major obstacle in the approximately 30,000 organ transplants performed world-wide each year.

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Researchers began using the drug in February on patients who had received kidney, liver, heart and pancreas transplants.

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Only two of 111 transplants have been rejected.

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The drug, discovered in 1984, is metabolized from soil fungus found in Japan.

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The Pittsburgh patients are the first humans to be given the drug, which is made by Fujisawa Pharmaceutical Co.

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"We consider it a life-saving drug, like one for AIDS," said Dr. John Fung, an immunologist at the University of Pittsburgh.

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Researchers say they believe FK-506 is 100 times more effective than the traditional anti-rejection drug, cyclosporine, made by Swiss pharmaceutical giant Sandoz Ltd.

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They are also encouraged by the relatively mild side effects of FK-506, compared with cyclosporine, which can cause renal failure, morbidity, nausea and other problems.

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"The side effects of cyclosporine have made the penalty for its success rather high," Dr. Starzl said.

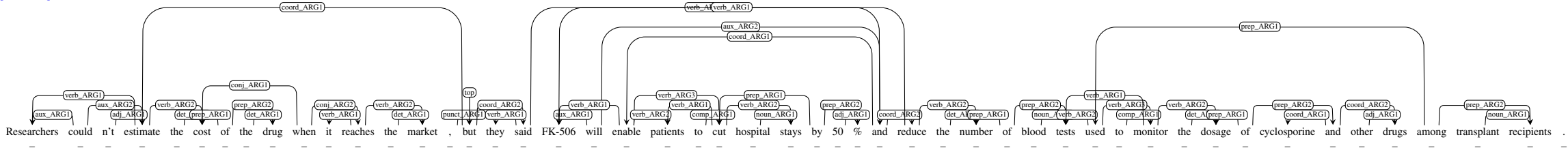
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Dr. Fung said that FK-506 would not be available in the market for at least a year, and that the FDA approval process usually takes three years to five years.

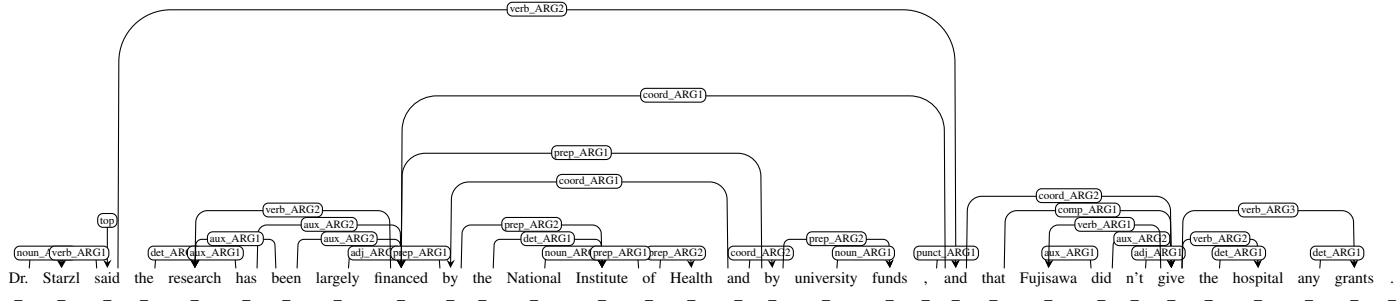
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There are no firm plans to expand the experimental program beyond the University of Pittsburgh, whose hospital performs the most transplants in the world.

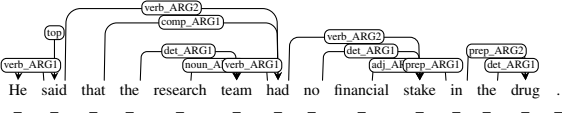
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