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55 anti-Aids drugs tried but only AZT is selling

By CATHERINE ARNST,LONDON, Wednesday

In the nine years since Aids was

first identified, the pharmaceutical

industry has developed some

55 drugs for the deadly disease.

But, despite the hundreds of

millions of dollars spent on research,

only one drug treatment,

.AZT (Azidothymidine), has been

licensed for Acquired Immune

Deficiency Syndrome, and it

costs each patient at least $3,400

(Sh71,400) a year.

The rest are still in various

phases of testing. Once licensed,

medical researchers said they will

probably be taken in conjunction.

with AZT, in the sort of drug

"cocktails" now used to treat

cancer.

Consequently Welcome PLC,

the company that makes AZT, is

at the centre of a social and medical

controversy. Aids-victims

picket Well come in protest at the.

high price of the drug, and doctors

worry about the serious side

effects that it can cause.

Industry analysts expect the

British pharmaceutical' giant to

remain at the eye of the storm for

the next three to four years, as no

drug treatment now being tested

appears to be as effective against

Aids as AZT, trade named

Retrovir,

Retrovir only delays the

progress of Aids in the body, and

patients in the acute stages of the

disease cannot take it for more

than 18 months without developing

acute anemia.

Studies released in August

showed that AZT was much less

toxic for people who were infected

with the Aids virus but had

not yet developed symptoms,

making the drug more tolerable

for a larger group of people.

But recently, Welcome scientists

found that certain strains of

HIV, the virus that causes Aids,

are becoming resistant to AZT,

and rats exposed to high dosages

of the drug developed vaginal

cancer ..

No drug under development

holds out the promise of a cure,

and medical experts say it will be

10 years before a vaccine is

developed.

In the meantime, Aids sufferers

can expect more expensive

drugs, all with their own set of

side effects, and the prospect of a

lifelong drug maintenance

progamme that will keep them

. alive but not healthy.

"Retrovir is fairly secure as the

"gold standard" for Aids drugs

for the next four to five years,"

said Mr Erling Refsum, who follows

the drug industry for Nomura

Research.

"There will be a lot of drugs

coming through that will challenge

it, but all will be compared

to AZT, and effectiveness will always

be more important than

price." ..

Few observers expect any Aids

treatment to be cheaper than

AZT. Wellcome cut 'the price

from $8,000 to $6,400 last September,

and earlier this month

the US Government approved a

lower dosage, effectively cutting

the cost of treatment to $3,400 a

year .•

Development costs are high for

any drug, but Aids presents a

particularly difficult target because

it destroys the body's entire

immune system. Victims can contract

everything from the rarest

forms of cancer to pneumonia.

In addition, the spread of the

disease is nowhere near the magnitude

of such killers as cancer

and heart disease.

The World Health

Organization estimates that five

to 10 million people may be infected with the HIV virus worldwide.

However, only some

600,000 full-blown aids victims

have been identified, about half

of whom have died, so the base of

users for any Aids drug - other

than a vaccine - is small.

"The pricing of other drugs will

be similar to AZT," said Mr Andrew

Porter, a drug industry analyst

with Nikko Securities Co in

London. "It costs more than $100

million to develop a drug and

companies .have to recoup that

investment."

Aids drugs under development

generally fall into three

categories:

.Antiviral, like Retrovir,

which interfere with the biological

processes that allow the Aids

virus to replicate in the body.

.Immune stimulators, which

act to boost the body's natural

immune system, so that it can

protect the body from the many

diseases that result from the

virus.

.Vaccines which block the virus

from either progressing in the

body or, ideally, from entering

the body' at all.

The next drug to win a license

is expected to be DDI

'(Dideoxyinosine), trade named

Videx, and made by the US drug

company Bristol-Myers Co. Like

Retrovir, DDl is an antiviral and

highly toxic.

Although Videx has undergone

no clinical trials, in September

the United States approved the

drug only for Aids patients who

are seriously ill and unable to tolerate

Retrovir. Aids researchers

said that ideally, AZT and DDl

should be used in rotation to

minimize their respell' e

toxicities ..

Hoffman la Roche GS of Switzerland has a similar drug in clinical

trials, DDC

(Dideoxycytidine), and there

have been promising' reports on a

compound drug called Carbovir,

under development by Glaxo

Holdings PLC of Britain.

The immune stimulator that

has shown the most promise is

Imuthiol, the trade name for

Diethyldithiocarbauiate, made by

France's Rhone-Poulenc. The

drug has long been used in

France to treat cancer and a similar

drug, Ant abuse, is sold in the

United States for the treatment·

of alcoholism.

French researchers said in

October, 1988, that Imuthiol

curbed symptoms of Aids in patients

who carry the HIV virus

but have not yet developed the

disease.

. But their study came under attack for using too small a

pie of patients and lasting only

weeks. The medical community is

now awaiting the results of an

extensive clinical trial of

Imuthiol recently completed in

the United States.

There are only a handful of

vaccines being tested, and they

only block the virus once it enters

the body.

In December, US researchers

reported the development of the

first vaccine that actually protected

monkeys from getting the

virus.

The researchers said in a report:

"Our success is unambiguous

proof that a vaccine for Aids is

possible." Their research points

to the direction for development

of a human vaccine. But medical

. experts almost universally agree

that such a vaccine is some 10

years away. (Reauters)