

Merck Obtains Rights To Ebola Vaccine



Merck & Co. has obtained the rights to an experimental Ebola vaccine. The vaccine has been developed by NewLink Genetics Corp. According to reports, Merck will be paying NewLink \$30 million upfront plus an additional \$20 million when clinical trials get under way. NewLink originally obtained this vaccine in 2010 from Canadian officials for \$200,000.

Early-stage testing has already begun at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in the US. The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) is also planning a larger, human study in early 2015 to test the vaccine along with another experimental Ebola vaccine that has been co-developed by the NIH and GlaxoSmithKline.

NewLink will also receive royalties from Merck on sales of the product if it is approved for sale. The exchange of royalties will not apply to Africa and other low-income countries. If the vaccine is approved, it could be a major breakthrough as there is currently no treatment available for Ebola.

The vaccine rVSV-EBOV has already been licensed by NewLink from the Public Health Agency of Canada. It uses a weakened strain of a vesicular stomatitis, a virus that typically afflicts cattle. The strain is modified to express an Ebola virus protein that could help trigger an immune response to Ebola.

As per the deal with NewLink, Merck will have the exclusive rights to the vaccine as well as any follow-up products. The Public Health Agency of Canada will retain the non-commercial rights to the vaccine.

According to a spokeswoman from Merck, the company is committed to making the vaccine affordable and sustainable since the need is urgent and low-income countries are the ones where the impact of Ebola is the greatest.

It is believed that Merck already has the technology in place to ramp up large-scale production. Merck is also a feasible partner with NewLink since it has a strong hold in the vaccines industry. The company is likely to gain more ground as it competes in this segment with GlaxoSmithKline and Johnson & Johnson.

"Merck's vaccine development expertise, commercial leadership and history of successful strategic alliances make it an ideal partner to expedite the development of rVSV-EBOV and, if demonstrated to be efficacious and well-tolerated, to make it available to individuals and communities at risk of Ebola virus infection around the world," noted Dr. Charles Link, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of NewLink Genetics.

Source: Wall Street Journal, Fierce Biotech

Image Credit: Deviantart.net

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