

China confirmed that Japanese medicine was effective at treating Covid-19

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China yesterday confirmed an effective anti-influenza drug for the treatment of Covid-19 disease. The drug, called favipiravir, was developed by the Japanese company Fujifilm Toyama Chemical and sold under the Avigan brand.

" *It is very safe and obviously effective* ," Zhang Xinmin, director of the Chinese Ministry of Science's Biotechnology Development Center, told a news conference.

Favipiravir has been developed by Fujifilm since 2014. The drug has also been used to treat Covid-19 patients in Japan since February.

After new information showed positive clinical trial results in China, Fujifilm's stock rose more than 15%.

However, it is worth mentioning that Asia Nikkei today said it is unlikely that Fujifilm has benefited from this move. Because a Chinese pharmaceutical company is trying to produce favipiravir itself in large quantities.

Fujifilm's favipiravir patent is still valid in Japan, but it has expired in China, allowing any company in the country to produce favipiravir under a generic version of a cheap generic drug.



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China's confirmation came after they ended a clinical trial with favipiravir on 200 patients infected with Covid-19 in Wuhan and Shenzhen.

The results showed that the patients taking the experimental drug recovered quickly and shortened the time for negative test results for the virus. Their symptoms of pneumonia also decreased significantly.

On average, after 4 days, patients taking favipiravir will have a negative test result, compared with 11 days in the control group without medication, Zhang said. Favipiravir is also safe and does not have any significant side effects.

Another clinical trial in Wuhan showed that patients treated with favipiravir had a fever cut after an average of 2.5 days, compared with 4.2 days for other patients who did not take the drug. Symptoms like cough also improved within 4.6 days - about 1.4 days earlier than others.

Only 8.2% of patients on favipiravir needed respiratory support, while 17.1% of patients in the control group needed breathing aids.

The positive results in China contradict the reservations about Avigan in Japan, the home of the drug. Avigan has been approved by Japan since 2014, but only prescribed for use in case the Japanese government needs it to fight a new influenza virus or a strong recurrence of the flu.

Studies show that this drug can cause death or birth defects. Favipiravir is also found in semen of patients after treatment.

According to South Korea's Yonhap news agency, the country's Ministry of Food Safety and Pharmaceuticals also decided not to import Avigan, after infectious disease experts ruled that there was insufficient clinical data to prove its effect.



Favipiravir is a Japanese research and development drug.

Immediately after China announced the results of clinical trials of favipiravir, Fujifilm's shares traded on the Tokyo Stock Exchange increased 15.4%. However, it is unclear how the company will benefit if Chinese companies start mass production of favipiravir.

A spokeswoman for Fujifilm said the company is not involved in Chinese clinical trials and is currently evaluating them.

Fujifilm signed a patent agreement relating to favipiravir with China's Zhejiang Pharmaceutical Company Hisun in 2016. But the spokesperson said the deal was canceled last year, although the party is still in a "cooperative relationship".

The Chinese company said it received official approval to produce favipiravir in February and could increase production for the generic version of the drug in the near future.

Generic drug is a drug with the same active ingredient as the generic drug. A generic drug, also known as a brand-name drug, means a drug containing a new pharmaceutical substance, invented by researchers or manufacturers.

The patent company is allowed to monopolize the production of the product for a specified period of time (usually 10 to 20 years from the date the substance is found).

During this protection period, another company wishing to produce a generic drug under the original brand name must obtain permission from the exclusive firm. At the same time, they pay royalties to compensate for drug research and development, which is often included in 80-85% of production costs.

After the expiry of the patent protection period, other pharmaceutical companies are allowed to produce generic brand-name drugs called generic drugs. Generic drugs must have the same brand-name ingredient as the generic drug.

This means that the Chinese version of favipiravir, if produced, will contain the same amount of favipiravir as Japan's Avigan, but it is expected to be much cheaper, due to the lack of research and development costs.

According to a spokesperson for Fujifilm, the company still holds the patent for the original favipiravir in Japan, but its patent in China expired last year. This gave Zhejiang Pharmaceutical Company the right to produce their generic version.

In Japan, Fujifilm is also supplying Avigan medicine to domestic hospitals to conduct clinical trials on Covid-19 patients. Japanese research has only begun in March, and will take several months to produce results.

References *Asia Nikkei*

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