

SA vaccine in pipeline

COVID: PROMISING FIRST RESULTS FROM VARSITIES' COLLABORATION

⇒ **Drug goes into animal trials next, meaning there's a long way to go to finish line – researcher.**

Simnikiwe Hlatshaneni

A collaboration between Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and North West University (NWU) has led to "very promising first results" from pre-clinical trials on a new Covid-19 vaccine candidate.

But despite their success, in the competitive Covid-19 vaccine development race, funding is not easy to come by, said one of the key researchers on the project, Prof Petra Bester of NWU.

"Being one of the smaller universities in South Africa [in terms of resources] it's been quite a hectic challenge to access the whole value chain. The project is in the final phase of a preclinical animal trial and we will soon be able to release its evidence and findings."

How long it could take to convert this into a vaccine for humans, Bester was unable to say.

Since their results have yet to be published, all Bester would divulge about the technology behind the vaccine was that it uses a DNA-related mechanism and was relatively affordable and easy to produce.

The DNA vaccine candidate was developed by Germany-based Professor Markus Depfenhart, who holds extraordinary appointments as a professor at both universities. The trials, which are being conducted at the preclinical drug development platform at the NWU, are well advanced and promising.

The trial and the analyses would continue over the following weeks, but the road to a finished product was likely to be long.

"What we have learned over the past few months in South



MONEY MATTERS Nurses working for National Education take part in a gathering in Paris yesterday called by the National Union of Nurse Health Advisors to demand wage increase and staff recruitment. Picture: AFP

Africa is that the vaccine world is highly competitive. To become a player in the vaccine environment is extremely difficult," said Bester.

"We have our major universities playing in that field and we immediately learned that as much as we have Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer and AstraZeneca coming out, we will be quiet for a while, make sure there is excellent science and get our ethics in place and do a proper animal trial."

The university's collaboration with Walter Sisulu University opened up a relationship between the project leaders and the Walter Sisulu Foundation. Together, the group has established a nonprofit organisation called the Sisulu Foundation for African and Pandemic Disease Response. This is in collaboration with partners in

Kenya, Botswana, Germany and Slovenia.

"Although the vaccine is big news, the vision is that it's time to bring vaccine development back into pan-Africa," said Bester.

Prof Rushiella Songea, vice-chancellor and principal of WSU, said the vaccine candidate was a door-opener for research in Africa.

"We look forward to a strong future collaboration resulting from this initiative and strengthening bonds in the Pan-African research and innovation community. We can no longer afford to work in isolation from one another on the continent – we need links and partnerships to grow and succeed."

Advocate Tembeka Ngcukaitobi, chair of the WSC council, expressed his support for the initiative and said the impact of Covid-19 has been devastating to the

world especially Africa.

"It is hoped that the promising results of this trial will not be limited to WSU and NWU, but will carry significance for other African universities and the developing world as a whole.

"As we move towards the next phase of this project, we hope to enter into meaningful partnerships with other institutions which share our vision and aspirations for the advancement of humanity."

In another vaccine success, Clinical trials of an experimental Covid-19 vaccine produced by US company ImmunityBio progressed to phase one in March.

According to Professor Graeme Meintjes, the trial was being conducted at a clinic in Khayelitsha belonging to the Wellcome Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Africa.

Vaccines are usually approved after phase three trial results have been published. – simnikiweh@citizen.co.za

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