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Nov. 19, 2008

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Southwest Oncology Group receives \$ 2.5 million to combat prime cause of stomach cancer

Major U.S. cancer research group will conduct trials in six Latin American countries to test drug regimens against infection that leads to major global killer

ANN ARBOR, Mich. - One of the largest U.S. cancer clinical trial networks will undertake a clinical trial, supported by a \$2,520,905 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the University of Michigan, to find the most effective way to eradicate an extremely common bacterial infection that is the principal known cause of stomach cancer.

The Southwest Oncology Group, based at the University of Michigan, will use the funds to lead a clinical trial involving 1,400 people infected with the common bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* at seven clinical centers in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. The trial will compare the effectiveness of two different combinations of antibiotics known to effectively treat *H. pylori*, one given for five days and the other for 14 days.

“A shorter regimen, if effective, would make a future public health effort to eradicate *H. pylori* cheaper and more feasible,” said principal investigator Laurence H. Baker, D.O., professor of Internal Medicine and Pharmacology at the University of Michigan and chairman of the Southwest Oncology Group.

“This study will be the first step in a comprehensive plan to determine whether curing *H. pylori* can reduce the incidence of gastric cancer, one of the leading causes of cancer-related mortality worldwide,” says E. Robert Greenberg, M.D., senior epidemiologist, Cancer Research and Biostatistics and affiliate member of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle.

The long-range goal of this trial and larger trials in the future is to establish simple, low-cost ways to eliminate *H. pylori* infections and thereby prevent stomach cancer, one of the world’s two leading causes of cancer deaths.

Chronic infection with *H. pylori* is associated with two-thirds of all cases of stomach cancer, diagnosed in nearly a million people worldwide each year. Stomach cancer, though not a leading form of cancer in the United States, is the main cause of cancer death in much of East Asia and Latin America.

Antibiotics can effectively rid people of infection with *H. pylori*, the same microbe that causes peptic ulcers. But most countries with high rates of stomach cancer have not implemented large-scale efforts to treat *H. pylori* infections. That could change, if this initial trial and a much larger one planned in the future are able to show that such an effort could prevent stomach cancer and not prove too costly. Previous studies have shown that programs to eradicate *H. pylori* could save lives and reduce health care expenditures.

“Our study will establish the effectiveness of different treatment regimens to cure *H. pylori* infection in Central and South America and will help to establish a network of researchers for the next phase of the study and make a far-reaching difference in health worldwide,” says Baker.

The Southwest Oncology Group (<http://swog.org>) is one of the largest cancer clinical trials cooperative groups in the United States. Funded by research grants from the National Cancer Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, the group conducts clinical trials to prevent and treat cancer and improve the quality of life for cancer survivors. The group's network of more than 5,000 physician-researchers, practice at nearly 550 institutions, including 18 National Cancer Institute-designated cancer centers. Headquartered in Ann Arbor, Mich., the group has an operations office in San Antonio, Texas, and a statistical center in Seattle, Wash.

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