

## **Scientists may be able to stop the spread of skin cancer cells**

**For immediate release**

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A team of top scientists at the University of East Anglia are pioneering a new way to stop the spread of cancerous cells in people diagnosed with malignant melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

The study, funded by the skin disease research charity the British Skin Foundation, will look at the role of an important growth protein, known as Transforming Growth Factor-beta (TGF-beta). The protein plays a crucial role in determining the rate in which melanoma cells are produced and how they spread to other tissues and organs in the body.

The research team, headed by Dr Andrew Chantry at the School of Biological Sciences in Norwich, has recently identified a new way to block the activity of this protein and have started to identify new molecules that have thus far been able to prevent melanoma cell growth. Dr Chantry says: "Previous studies conducted have shown that increased activity and production of this protein is a major driving force behind the changes in skin cancer cells that make them migrate from the original tumour site and invade other tissues in the body."

Skin cancer is now the most common form of cancer in the UK with 100,000 new cases of the disease diagnosed every. Malignant melanoma kills approximately 2,000 people every year in England and Wales alone. The cancer develops when skin pigment cells in the skin known as melanocytes grow uncontrollably. Despite the various forms of treatment currently available for other types of skin cancer, the most effective way of treating malignant melanoma is still by surgical removal. However, treating patients with a melanoma that is greater than one millimetre in depth remains extremely difficult, with late-stage melanoma often untreatable with a life expectancy of less than a year.

Although the year-long project is still in its initial stages, the potential of being able to stop the spread of cancerous cells is huge. Dr Chantry is hopeful about what it could mean for the future. He says: "If successful, our approach to hinder skin cancer cell growth and the spread of a disease from one organ to another organ or tissue would represent a major step forward. As it selectively targets only a single part of TGF-beta activity, this procedure would also mean unwanted side-effects are far less likely."

"The long-term goal is to use three-dimensional structural biology approaches to further refine and improve the efficacy of the inhibitory compounds so that we may be able to better manage and treat people with late-stage melanoma," adds Dr Chantry.

Matthew Patey, Chief Executive of the British Skin Foundation says: "Skin cancer hits the headlines every year and quite rightly so. It remains a huge issue in the UK, and studies like these only highlight the fact that we still have a long way to go before we fully understand the disease and how best to treat it. We hope that what Dr Chantry and his team find with their novel approach to malignant melanoma treatment will prove to be an important step towards finding a cure for this devastating disease."

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The British Skin Foundation (BSF) is a charity committed to raising funds for skin disease research. Over the last three years alone, the BSF has awarded in excess of £2.2 million to a number of studies that aim to find new treatments and eventually cures for the many skin diseases in the UK.

The Skin Cancer Appeal for 2010/11 has just been launched by the British Skin Foundation, and aims to raise over £100,000 for research into skin cancers, its treatments and cures.