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Drug companies pool Alzheimer's information

A dozen large pharmaceutical companies will on Friday unveil a groundbreaking project to share information on patients enrolled in their clinical trials for Alzheimer's disease, in an effort to accelerate the development of new treatments.

The move, co-ordinated by the US-based Coalition Against Major Diseases, marks the latest in an intensifying series of research initiatives by industry to override competitive concerns and open up their findings to others as they struggle to reduce costs and boost the speedy launch of medicines.

It comes as drug companies struggle on their own to limit rising development costs and to produce safe and effective new medicines in areas where the science is highly uncertain.

In the first step of the latest initiative, traditional rivals including Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Roche have agreed to place data on 4,000 patients in 11 different existing clinical trials into a common database, presented in a standard way.

Gary Pisano, a professor at Harvard Business School and an expert on innovation, said: “This is terrific and long overdue. The pharma industry used to define everything as competitive, and you can imagine the enormous duplication of effort. These kind of things will have a very positive impact on productivity. The electronics sector has done a lot more on pre-competitive co-operation.”

Collaborations

● Coalition Against Major Diseases: Alzheimer's clinical trial database (12 large pharmaceutical companies, academics, US and EU regulators)

● Structural Genomics Consortium on Epigenetics: (GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer with US, Canadian and European researchers)

● Asia Cancer Research Group: genetic samples for Asian cancer patients (Eli Lilly, Merck and Pfizer)

● Pistoia Alliance on non-competitive common standards: (AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis and Pfizer)

While keeping to themselves the more commercially sensitive information on patients' reactions to their competing experimental drugs, companies will share data on those in the placebo arm – receiving a simple sugar pill against which to compare the effect of their medicines.

That will help provide researchers with valuable information to help develop standard “biomarkers” or biological measurements which can be used to assess progress in tackling

Alzheimer's. The data will be managed by the Critical Path Initiative, created to foster a range of such co-operative agreements and funded jointly by Science Foundation Arizona and the US Food & Drug Administration, and will be made available to all bona fide researchers.

The Alzheimer's action follows collaborative projects in other disease areas, including a recent shared platform on genetic testing around cancer in Asia between several drug companies, and the so-called Pistoia Alliance to find common ground on chemistry and biological screening.

Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline also on Thursday joined a partnership with the Structural Genomics Consortium, which shares research between academics in Oxford, Toronto and Stockholm, to develop molecules useful in epigenetics, or changes in gene functions.

Michel Goldman, head of the Innovative Medicines Initiative in Brussels, which is developing projects between industry and academics with both corporate and European Union money, said: “At a time of financial crisis, for companies we can provide tolls to revise their classical business model and find new approaches.”

His organisation is preparing research and data-sharing programmes including on drug safety and notably indicators of liver toxicity.

Jane Sharples, general manager of CMR International, a body that co-ordinates discussions for regulatory reform, said of the Alzheimer's coalition: “This is a growing trend, particularly in areas where companies are really struggling on their own, such as diseases of the central nervous system and stroke.”

She said industry was evolving, and increasingly taking the view that it was unethical for different companies to be pursuing work on similar drugs, discovering toxicity and not share the data with others working in the same field. Not co-operating could slow innovation and put patients at unnecessary risk.

International regulators already share information on toxicity on experimental medicines with each other in an effort to prevent drug trials that could cause harm to patients, but do not currently share the data with other companies because of commercial confidentiality.

Andrew Jack

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