

New hope for cancer victims

Liver cancer is the second most common cancer causing death in Hong Kong. More than 1,600 new cases are detected each year. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C viral infections are the most common primary causes of liver cancer. Liver cancer is particularly widespread in Hong Kong because of the large number (10 per cent) of people suffering from hepatitis B. Other possible causes of liver cancer are alcoholism and genetic factors.

Removing tumours in the liver or replacing the liver with a new one, are currently the most common forms of surgery to deal with liver cancer. But surgery and other forms of treatment may prove ineffective when tumours in the liver are widespread.

Research shows that in addition to the spread of tumour cells, extensive growth of tumor blood vessels plays a critical role in the development of liver cancer. A protein known as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) has been found to be a promoting factor for this process. Therefore inhibiting this VEGF protein may help to treat liver cancer.

The University of Hong Kong Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine and Queen Mary Hospital have conducted a pilot study of 50 Chinese patients with advanced liver cancer who were treated with a molecular anti-cancer drug, called Sorafenib. The drug, targets at VEGF and reduces its strengths, restrains the spread of tumour cells. The drug was effective in a significant number of patients.