Hilleman Labs in talks to market next-gen oral cholera vaccine

Clinical trials likely to start next year

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Hilleman Laboratories is in discussions with vaccine makers to produce and market its products targeting respiratory and gastro-intestinal infections, two of the biggest health challenges in young children, said Chief Executive Daveard Gill.

Gill was speaking to BusinessLine on Hilleman's collaboration to develop a next-generation oral cholera vaccine, along with Sweden's Goteborg, a University of Gottingen spin-off biopharmaceutical company.

A yeast vaccine candidate is available and preclinical tests are on, Gill said, adding that clinical trials on the product were expected to start next year.

A stable product is expected only by 2018, but discussions are on with vaccine makers in India and other regions to help scale-up production and distribution once a final product is available, he said.

Hilleman is in equally partnered joint venture between drug major Merck and global charitable foundation Wellcome Trust, started with seed funding of $50 million in 2002.

Its 40-scientist strong research center has been operational in India since Jan 2011.

Low-priced

Hilleman expects to price its oral cholera vaccine lower than similar products available in the market, Gill said.

Competitors include Shang-hai Biotech's (now owned by Sanden) Shanchol vaccine priced at $205 a dose and Dukoral at $20 a dose, he added.

Outlining the benefits in Hilleman's oral cholera vac-cine, he said, it was more heat-stable, provided expanded protection against ETEC, diarrhoea, and it was easier to give to patients.

Heat-stability to vaccines allows them to be transported and used in remote regions without requiring cold storage.

Traditionally, the absence of cold storage chains has been a key concern in keeping vaccines stable in hot regions such as India and Africa.

Rotavirus vaccine

Hilleman is now working on a rotavirus vaccine that shows greater thermal-stability than those in the market, Gill said.

Rotavirus causes gastroenteritis with symptoms, including severe watery diarrhoea, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Clinical trials to test the safety and efficacy of Hilleman's rotavirus vaccine are also expected to start next year.

The company would like to partner with a single manufacturer across multiple products, he said, on the scale-up plan, once the rotavirus product was ready to be commercialised.

Usually structured as profit-sharing agreements, Gill expects to seal a partnership with the company, for the manufacture and sale of these products within this year.