

Scientists find anti-SARS drug

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Beijing, June 19: A medicine used in the treatment of schizophrenia was found to be effective in inhibiting the coronavirus which triggered the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Chinese and European scientists jointly announced on Sunday.

Cinanserin, being in therapeutic usage against the mental disease since the 1970s, was identified as a cure for the SARS epidemic and was the only ready-to-use medicine among the total 15 possible anti-SARS remedies recommended by scientists participating in the Sino-European Project on SARS Diagnostics and Antivirals (SEPSDA) after careful pathological studies.

"The finding means that cinanserin could be directly prescribed to prevent the SARS disease or treat SARS patients if the fatal epidemic mounts a comeback," Prof. Peter Kristensen, from Denmark's University of Aarhus said in Hangzhou, capital of East China's Zhejiang province.

The 14 other medicinal solutions have to go through lengthy animal tests before being used to treat human patients, said Kristensen, a participant of the three-year SEPSDA programme, which was funded by the European Union and involved eight Chinese and European institutions.

The ambitious programme, launched in 2004, aimed to find 50 chemical compounds to treat SARS. In the coming two years, scientists from China, Germany, Poland and Denmark will continue to

search for the rest 35 compounds, Xinhua news agency quoted sources with the programme as they said. Scientists also confirmed the finding of two homologous SARS coronaviruses in animals from the Netherlands, Hong Kong and China respectively.

Prof. Rolf Hilgenfeld, from Germany's University of Luebeck, said that both the

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newly-found viruses and the formerly-detected SARS virus were variations of an ancient virus, which had been harboured among animals for ages but remained unidentified.

The German scholar also said other latent coronaviruses could pose dangers to human beings as the SARS virus did.

"People should closely monitor such viruses and their variations to effectively prevent them from endangering humans,"

Hilgenfeld said. The Sars epidemic swept China from late 2002 to 2003, causing global concern before it was stopped. During the outbreak, more than 5,000 SARS cases were reported on the Chinese mainland, causing more than 350 deaths in the country. PTI