

Protech Biotech to start field trials of canine cancer drug this year

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Taiwanese start-up Protect Biotech is taking its PT001 drug candidate into domestic field trials in 2024.

Founded in 2019, the Taipei City-based company is developing the recombinant protein to treat malignant tumors in dogs. Haolin Sung, the firm's founder and chief executive, said a preliminary study with 10 dogs previously showed the drug candidate's good safety and efficacy – some of the dogs lived for more than a year after the trial concluded.

At the recent Animal Health, Nutrition and Technology Innovation Europe forum in London, he told S&P Global Animal health the firm is not only moving on to a Taiwanese clinical field trial in four clinics and 50 dogs this year but it will also apply to conduct a similar study in the US.

Mr Sung said the initial results with its **oncology candidate** gave the firm confidence to expand its pipeline. Protect has put together a pipeline of seven more candidates. These span infectious diseases, dermatology, osteoarthritis and pain in companion animals. The company is also developing diagnostic tools.

He stated: “We always wanted to grow the pipeline and because of the promising data we got more investors coming in. We knew oncology may not be the biggest market in animal health yet, so we looked at pain and dermatology – big markets.”

Protect is also working on a new platform that will support the development of antibody treatments for pets. This work is being carried out in partnership with an unnamed human biopharma company. Mr Sung did not divulge full details about this technology but did say it will help produce affordable next-generation drugs.

Scouting for opportunities

The key to populating Protect's R&D runway is its knowledge of the human biotechnology sector and where to find unique platforms that can be translated into prospects in the veterinary field – “we don't research, we do development,” Mr Sung stated. To date, the start-up has sourced its pipeline from unnamed companies and academic institutes in North America and Asia.

Mr Sung said Protect is always scouting for extra opportunities to bring additional candidates into its pipeline. The firm is also hoping to collaborate with animal health companies in boosting the development of PT001.

He noted most human pharma companies Protect talks to about licensing have not considered the opportunities offered by the animal health sector. Mr Sung said it is important for Protect to build a strong and trusting relationship with its potential collaborators. The company aims to offer an alternative stream of revenues to its partners, as well as ensure the technology is transferred correctly and replicates strong clinical data – so as not to impact negatively on human health trials. Protect's scientific team have a human biotech background and comprehend the rigors of this development pathway.

Protect's current investors are from Taiwan and specialize in supporting human biopharma opportunities. Mr Sung pointed out there are very few animal health start-ups in the region, which makes Protect stand out. While he suggested it is currently an opportunity for Protect to grab the spotlight as a unique start-up in a sector that could be seen as an alternative area for investor, Mr Sung also predicted there will be more young veterinary biopharma being formed in Asia soon. This is because the trend towards the humanization of companion animals has only just started occurring in Asia and this is leading to “the first wave of pet owners willing to pay more money to treat their pets better”.

He observed: “I think it’s a good thing we’re unique. We started first and have first-mover advantage. We are agile and this will help us to stay ahead.”

Another part of Protech’s strategy to make it stand out is its plan to go public in Taiwan this year. Mr Sung suggested this would mark a very rapid turnaround for the company to go from establishment to public in about five years.

He added: “The public markets in Taiwan are very active for biotechs and will help us attract more investors. We will be the first animal health biotech in Taiwan to do this.”