

Tessa forms \$120M cell therapy JV with China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City

By David Ho, Staff Writer

Singapore-based [Tessa Therapeutics Ltd.](#) and China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City (CSGKC) are committing a combined \$120 million to establish a joint venture to advance cell therapies targeting prevalent cancers in China.

CSGKC will put up \$80 million, with \$40 million of that in the first stage for a 13% stake in the yet-to-be named joint venture. Tessa will contribute \$40 million, with \$20 million for the initial investment, along with its technology license rights for China. It is understood that Tessa will hold the remaining 87% stake in the joint venture.

“The joint venture will be the sole licensee of Tessa’s cell therapies for research, clinical development and commercialization in China,” Tessa spokesperson told *BioWorld*. She declined to disclose specific details but said the “joint venture focuses on the China market with immediate priorities on the clinical development of our cell therapies and patient recruitment for trials.

“More importantly, the joint venture will give us access to leading clinical sites in this market for patient recruitment into our clinical trials,” she added.

“China is an important market in our goal to develop innovative cell therapies and make them widely accessible to cancer patients all over the world,” said Andrew Khoo, the CEO and co-founder of Tessa. Khoo said he sees the joint venture as “an important milestone in Tessa’s China strategy,” and stated it will draw from Tessa’s international clinical execution capability and cell therapy platform technologies.

“I firmly believe that having China as a core part of Tessa’s global clinical development strategy will accelerate our cell therapies to market,” he said.

Tessa has a robust portfolio of innovative, next-generation therapies that comprise virus-specific T-cell (VST) monotherapy and VSTs in combination with other immuno-oncology approaches.

“Our portfolio includes a rapidly growing pipeline of clinical and preclinical autologous and allogeneic programs that target a wide range of cancers, for patients with hematological malignancies and solid tumors,” said the Tessa spokesperson.

Tessa’s partner, CSGKC, is a greenfield master development by Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City Investment and Development Co. Ltd, itself a joint venture company established by Ascendas-Singbridge and the Guangzhou Development District (GDD).

Formerly known as the Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City, it is strategically located in the core area of the greater bay area (GBA) in south China. The GBA is an initiative that aims to

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Andrew Khoo
Co-founder and CEO, Tessa Therapeutics

integrate the economies and industries of Hong Kong and Macau with those of nine cities on the mainland.

Being located in the GBA is likely to be a strategically advantageous move for Tessa, as it gives it access to the financing muscle of Hong Kong as well as access to the mainland China market through conducting clinical trials with Chinese patients.

Last year, *BioWorld* reported that Tessa was more than halfway through the recruitment for what the firm said is the world’s largest phase III T-cell immunotherapy trial for any cancer indication. There are about 30 trial sites in five countries. (See *BioWorld*, March 6, 2018.)

The trial is testing TT-10, an immunotherapy treatment for nasopharyngeal cancer. It was based on Tessa’s VST platform, which had shown compelling results in solid tumors. Pending positive results, Tessa has estimated a product launch by 2020. More recently, Tessa has worked with Merck & Co. Inc., of Kenilworth, N.J., to explore the use of Tessa’s armored human papillomavirus-specific T-cell (HPVST) therapy (TT-12) in combination with Merck’s PD-1 drug, Keytruda (pembrolizumab), in patients with recurrent or metastatic HPV 16- and 18-positive cervical cancer. TT-12 is an autologous cell therapy product composed of HPVSTs that have been trained specifically to target HPV 16/18 antigens and have been genetically modified with a decoy TGF-beta receptor to overcome the suppressive tumor microenvironment.

Khoo had said that preliminary results from that trial show that armored HPVSTs and its combination with anti-PD-1 are well-tolerated, have minimal toxicities and show early signs of efficacy. Besides VST-based treatments for cancers, Tessa is also developing an allogeneic therapy to tackle Epstein-Barr virus-associated lymphomas. ♦