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Research Start-Up for HIV, TB Drugs

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NEWS

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By Tamar Kahn

Cape Town

Local drug development company iThemba Pharmaceuticals has secured R30m in start-up funding from biotechnology incubators BioPad and LifeLab.

The money will be used to kickstart a technology transfer agreement with US-based Emory University and biotechnology firm Chimerix that aims to produce new and better HIV and tuberculosis (TB) drugs.

The two diseases are major killers in sub-Saharan Africa, with SA hard hit by about 5,5-million people who are infected with HIV and with many of them also battling tuberculosis.

The investment would enable the biotech incubators to support basic science and its commercialisation, while hunting for solutions to two of SA's most pressing health problems, said BioPad CEO Butana Mboniswa.

BioPad and LifeLab are equal investment partners and will together hold 51% of iThemba's shares. Most of the funds would be used to build research capacity in SA, said LifeLab CEO Nhlanhla Msomi.

The company planned to recruit highly skilled scientists, including South Africans from overseas, he said. In a linked initiative, Emory University professor Dennis Liotta had applied for funding to train South African graduate students in the US, he said.

Liotta, who development several HIV drugs, including FTC, Truvada, Reverset, Racivir, and Elvucitabine, is one of the founders of iThemba, which has been slow to get off the ground since its inception five years ago. Local board members include Council for Scientific and Industrial Research CEO Sibusiso Sibisi and former Mondi MD Frank Fisher.

Emory University has agreed to licence iThemba with exclusive rights to a vast chemical library. They had also offered the rights to a quicker process for manufacturing the HIV drug abacavir, said Liotta in a telephone interview from Atlanta.

Chimerix holds the patents on a library of compounds that may hold the keys to novel anti-infective drugs, and has granted iThemba the rights to screen them for action against HIV and TB. It is understood that iThemba will not pay royalty fees for drug sales in poor countries.

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