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Chi-Med develops treatment for IBD

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Chinese medicine could provide a new way of treating inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Hong Kong-based Chi-Med, which specialises in developing drugs and supplements from traditional Chinese medicinal products, has announced positive results from a Phase II proof of concept study of its lead product HMPL-004 in mild to moderate cases of ulcerative colitis.

The disease is caused by abnormal immune responses, and primarily affects the rectum and lower colon, where painful ulcers form. Symptoms tend to be intermittent, and it can be treated with anti-inflammatory drugs, but in severe cases surgery is the only option.

In the Phase II trial, a total of 120 patients was given either the investigational drug three times a day, or the standard treatment, mesalazine, for eight weeks. The

two drugs had a similar effect on the patients' symptoms but, importantly, the number of adverse events was halved with HMPL-004. Preclinical trials also showed that it restored the lining of the gut.

The new drug is a compound extracted from a Chinese herb, which has been used extensively in China and south-east Asia to treat

respiratory infections and inflammation. Because of its history, the company was able to bypass the normal Phase I safety studies that have to be carried out on completely new drug products.

The company has discovered that the drug has a novel mechanism of action. It acts on multiple cellular targets along the inflammation pathway, and suppresses the production of inflammatory cytokines, such as tumour necrosis factor α and interleukin 1β . This means that it may be useful in the 40% of colitis patients who do not respond to current drug therapies, and those who become resistant to it.

Chi-Med is also carrying out Phase II trials in Crohn's disease, a related condition that affects the intestines, and hopes to license the drug out for further development once these are complete.

