Coping with asbestos legacy

ONCOLOGY For patients with malignant pleural mesothelioma – often caused by asbestos exposure – there are almost no effective treatments available. Barcelona-based Aromics intends to change this, and has started its project BERMES, short for "A novel derivative BERberine for Malignant MESothelioma." The two-and-a-half-year project aims to complete the regulatory preclinical trials of first-in-class, anti-tumour agent NAX035, and has been awarded with €1.1m from the European Union through Horizon 2020.

"The Aromics molecule binds to a specific messenger RNA and reduces the levels of a protein that is abnormally expressed in the tumour, and that is causing resistance to current chemotherapy treatments in mesothelioma patients," explains Carmen Plasencia, co-founder and CEO of Aromics. The compound has already demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing the tumour size in animal models. According to Aromics, several pharmaceutical companies have shown interest in the drug.

All in all, the BERMES project has a budget of €1.55m. The company, which is located at the Barcelona Science Park, raised 400,000 in 2017 through the crowdfunding biomedicine platform Capital Cells, and 120,000 euros are a participative loan allocated by the Catalan Institute of Finance through the corporate entrepreneurship programme IFEM.

Asbestos has long been recognised as a first-level carcinogen, and it was banned in the EU in 2003. However, due to a long latency period of around 40 years, an estimated 300,000 Europeans will die of mesothelioma by 2030. ■

Aromics CEO Carmen Plasencia