

Biotech firm offers remedy for carmaker void

SID MAHER
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

AS Geelong in Victoria and Elizabeth in South Australia contemplate life without Holden and Ford, Peter French is eyeing the buildings that have produced the nation's most popular cars and wondering whether they might be the birthplace of his dream.

Dr French is managing director of biotechnology company Benitech Biopharma, which is on the verge of testing its gene therapy drugs in humans, a trial that could pave the way for a massive new sunrise industry in Australia.

Dr French wants to examine adapting the Holden and Ford buildings into a hi-tech manufacturing facility that could allow them to produce drugs for hundreds of millions of people around the world.

"It is not inconceivable that we could look at doing it in South Australia or Victoria to replace a sunset industry with a sunrise industry," he said.

The US Food and Drug Administration is expected to approve within weeks human trials of a gene-silencing medicine that could shut down the part of a person's DNA affected by the hepatitis C virus.

Duke University in North Carolina and the University of California, San Diego, will handle the trials.

The technique, which is also being developed for hepatitis B and a form of lung cancer, could provide a long-term treatment for the diseases and open up a new industry for Australia.

Dr French says the market for the drug, if the trials are successful, could be immense. Hepatitis C affects 170 million people worldwide and the numbers expand



RENEE NOWYTARGER

Biotech company director Peter French says Holden and Ford factories could gain a new life as pharmaceutical manufacturing plants

exponentially when hepatitis B and lung cancer are added.

"If our trials are successful, we can show that a single-shot treatment for hepatitis C can provide long-term treatment or even a cure," he said. "Then obviously that's an enormous market that we have to service and a big challenge."

If the trials go ahead, the company expects to have initial results

within three months and be in a position to begin making plans for a manufacturing process by the middle of the year.

Dr French says the capacity to manufacture gene therapy products doesn't exist at the moment.

"So we have a significant challenge to work out how to manufacture our products and work out how to service that potential market," Dr French said.

He says the company would love to manufacture in Australia but costs of land, buildings and wages were high.

The company has considered looking at China as a potential site of manufacturing, and Chinese local governments have indicated that there are a number of concessions in wages and land that would be made available.

"We are not saying that we can

solve Australian manufacturing, the hole that's left with the automobile industry leaving," Dr French said. "But what we can say is we are one example of an innovative industry that we can take ownership of in Australia if we are fast and clever."

He said if everything went to plan the company could begin manufacturing by 2017, just as the sun sets on Holden.