

Ross River virus symptoms: Fifty-year-old medicine could have potential to ease suffering

Janelle Miles, The Courier-Mail

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GRIFFITH University researchers have found a new use for a 50-year-old medicine as a potential therapy for the debilitating Ross River virus.

Human trials to test the effectiveness of an injectable form of pentosan polysulfate in Ross River fever patients are expected to begin in Queensland early next year.

But scientist Lara Herrero, of the university's Institute for Glycomics, on the Gold Coast, said five patients diagnosed with the mosquito-borne virus had already been given the drug through a special access scheme with "good success".

She said comprehensive testing in animals infected with Ross River fever, or the closely related chikungunya virus, had also found "massive improvements" in joint pain and swelling after treatment with pentosan polysulfate.



Dr Lara Herrero, a researcher at Griffith University. Picture: Tim Marsden

The viruses can cause crippling pain and joint arthritis so severe the symptoms can last years. "This drug protects cartilage in the joints, to prevent them from being broken down, and, in doing so, reduces pain," Dr Herrero said.

"It also reduces the proteins that cause inflammation."

Pentosan polysulfate is already registered in Australia as an oral treatment for cystitis, which is inflammation of the bladder. Dr Herrero started work on finding a treatment for Ross River fever after contracting it herself as a PhD student in Perth more than a decade ago. "I was acutely ill for about three to four months," she said. "Then you're in chronic pain for up to two years after initially being infected."

Griffith has joined forces with Melbourne company Paradigm Biopharmaceuticals to fund next year's trials in up to 40 Queensland patients with Ross River fever.

Last year was the worst on record for Ross River fever in Queensland with 6192 patients diagnosed. Records have been kept since the early 1990s. So far this year, 2168 cases have been recorded in the state.