Science finds possible 'cell fountain of youth'

Texas researchers discover enzyme that affects aging process

By PAUL RECER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Texas researchers say they may have found the "cellular fountain of youth," an enzyme that in laboratory experiments causes human cells to avoid the normal process of aging and cell death.

The finding by researchers at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas won't make people any younger or allow them to live forever but scientists said it could conceivably keep them healthier longer.

"This process may increase the normal health span, but not the normal life span," said Dr. Jerry Shay of the University of Texas, the lead researcher. "We're not saying that this will give people something to make them live longer."

Shay said Tuesday the work confirms that cells can be kept youthful far beyond their normal life span by blocking a natural aging and dying process.

By keeping the cells alive and dividing, he said, it may be possible to control age-related disorders ranging from skin wrinkling to some types of blindness to cardiovascular disease.

Though it is still in the future, Shay said the work could lead to drugs that will stop the cells from

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dying and, thus, preserve the functioning of parts of the body that normally decline with age.

The report is to be published in the journal *Science* on Friday. It was released prematurely on Tuesday by a Washington aging research organization, causing a dramatic rise in the stock price of Geron Corp., a California biotech research company that collaborated with the Texas researchers and which holds rights to some of the findings.

Trading of Geron stock on the Nasdaq stock exchange was briefly halted after it soared 24 percent.

After trading resumed, the stock continued to climb, closing the day at $14.375, up more than 43 percent.

'Real potential'

Anna M. McCormack, a researcher at the National Institute of Aging, said the work "has a real potential" for leading to therapies to treat age-related disorders caused by cells that die.

But whether this will extend life has not been shown. "We need to see if aging on a cellular level has anything to do with aging of the whole organism," she said.

The researcher who first discovered some 30 years ago that human cells age and die, Dr. Leonard Hayflick of the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine, said it will be at least five years before the discovery can be used to treat patients, but it could lead to drugs that slow or stop the aging process of specific cells in the body.

This could be important in extending functions that are now lost as people get older, he said.