

New test for lung cancer 'could save thousands'

BRITISH scientists have developed the first blood test for lung cancer which could save thousands of lives.

The revolutionary test picks up proteins in blood that are only produced as a reaction to the presence of lung cancer cells.

These proteins will appear long before tumours develop, meaning further investigations in the form of scans and biopsies could be started at a much earlier stage.

Specialists say this will greatly improve survival rates because lung cancer is typically discovered late, when tumours are relatively advanced.

Cancer is currently diagnosed only after a sample of lung tissue is collected during an invasive biopsy procedure and then analysed.

Nearly 40,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with the disease every year.

It is one of the country's biggest killers - on average someone dies from it every 15 minutes - and only ten per cent of patients will still be alive five years after diagnosis.

The new test was created by cancer experts at the University of Nottingham, who set up the commercial

By Jo Macfarlane

company Oncimmune to develop it further, and launched it in the US last week. It should be available in Britain next year.

It would involve patients giving a conventional blood sample and could become a routine part of NHS care for people considered most at risk, such as smokers, those with

'Nothing like this exists at the moment'

respiratory diseases and those with a family history of the disease.

It is thought that patients will be able to get the test 'on demand' if they go private.

Professor Stephen Spiro, head of thoracic medicine at University College Hospital, London, and one of the UK's leading lung cancer experts, said that the tests would 'undoubtedly' save lives.

'While it cannot predict whether someone is likely to develop lung

cancer, it does identify patients before they even have symptoms,' he said. 'The smaller the cancer is when it is diagnosed, the better the chances of survival.'

'Nothing like this test exists at the moment so it is really very exciting. It's better than a CT scan and will save lives.'

Geoffrey Hamilton-Fairley, chairman of Oncimmune, said: 'As soon as there is an immune system response to cancer, we can pick up the antibodies which the body produces.'

'The overall performance of the test compared to a CT scan is better, because a scan produces so many false positives.'

The antibodies produced by the body in response to the presence of cancer cells are different for each type of the disease.

Mr Hamilton-Fairley says Oncimmune has identified the antibodies specific to breast cancer and is in the final stages of developing a test for the disease, which will be available within months.

But he hopes that a single blood test, which would be able to identify any cancer type, will be available within five years.