Malaria drug could speed recovery

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A generic anti-malaria medicine has shown promise in reducing the symptoms of coronavirus, raising hopes that it could limit the pressure on the NHS.

A trial involving 36 French patients with Covid-19 showed that 70 per cent of those who were given hydroxychloroquine got rid of the virus within three to six days. Only 13 per cent of the control group, who did not receive the drug, recovered that quickly.

The finding followed other promising results from Chinese scientists, who looked at a closely related anti-malaria drug called chloroquine which was discovered nearly 90 years ago.

Ian Jones, professor of virology at the University of Reading, who was not involved in the research, said of the French study: “The caveats are important — that the studies have only been done so far with small patient groups of mixed severity so it is not yet clear it applies to all. However, if it pans out it could be a game-changer.”

Online pharmacies have sold out of the medicine and the NHS has banned exports. It is rarely used now to protect against malaria, raising questions about supplies in the UK. However, the drug is not protected by a patent, meaning that cheap generic versions can be made. A study published in the journal Cell Discovery by a team of Chinese researchers said that both chloroquine and remdesivir, an experimental antiviral drug originally developed to treat ebola, had shown promise in laboratory tests.

President Trump yesterday also expressed enthusiasm for chloroquine to be taken as soon as anyone self isolates.

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