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A COMMON acne drug could be used to treat Motor Neurone Disease, the Scottish Sunday Express can reveal. Scientists believe the antibiotic, minocycline, frequently prescribed by GPs for acne may be capable of slowing down the disease. It is hoped the drug may prolong the survival of people with the most common form of the MND, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Early American studies suggest it might be able to decrease the severity of disease and even help maintain muscle function in those with ALS. Now Britain's Medical Research Council is set to back a mass clinical trial of the drug in humans due to begin later this year. Details of the study are yet to be finalised but it is understood it will involve around 1,000 patients across 30 hospitals in Europe who are in the early stages of ALS.

There is currently only one treatment licensed for use in the UK - rilutek - although Jimmy Johnstone had been battling to receive a new drug called Copaxone, which had been used in trials to treat MND sufferers in the US, shortly before he died. With hope of a cure for MND through controversial stemcell or gene therapies treatments still years away, researchers are currently trying to develop a successful cocktail of drugs to help ease the symptoms of MND and extend patients' lives.

Similar "combination therapies" have proved successful in the fight against killer diseases such as cancer and HIV/AIDS. The new trial will see patients take minocycline alongside rilutek. Minocycline, like other commonly prescribed medications such as aspirin, is as a "dirty drug" because it has many possible affects on the body but is known to be safe. It has previously been used in trials to slow or prevent blindness in diabetics and as a potential treatment for multiple sclerosis.

Stem cells, which have the capacity to turn into other cells in the body, have been hailed as a future cure for conditions as Parkinson's, Alzheimers, and MND.

Among those leading research in this field is Professor Ian Wilmut, the man behind Dolly the Sheep, but experts say it will be difficult to replace motor neurones because they can be up to one metre in length - a 100,000 times bigger than most other cells in the body.

