

## Dicerna rallies early support for its RNAi technology

By Mark Hollmer

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RNAi has yet to yield new drugs in the marketplace. But Jim Jenson, CEO of **Dicerna Pharmaceuticals Inc.**, is already envisioning the next generation of RNAi drug development.

After little more than a year in operation, Dicerna recently closed a follow-up portion of a \$21.4 million first round of venture funding, based on the huge promise of the company's technology.

Jenson is now planning to hire as many as 17 people and looking to clinical trials within the next 18 months. The company also is actively marketing its technology to drug development partners.

Jenson's pitch: Dicerna promises more power and a longer-lasting treatment. In-house programs will target tumors and such diseases as diabetes and hepatitis C. Partnerships with pharmaceutical companies would likely expand Dicerna's focus onto other disease areas.

"It provides greater potency than existing (RNAi) approaches in the market and greater duration of action," Jenson said. To that end, Dicerna plans to boost its staff over the next several months and begin clinical trials by early 2010. The goal is to advance the concept of RNAi beyond its current premise.

Scientists believe RNAi, which occurs naturally in the body, can be harnessed to turn off bad genes that cause disease. That has led to the rapid growth of companies such as Cambridge-based **Alnylam Pharmaceuticals Inc.** (Nasdaq: ALNY), which has at least one drug in midstage human clinical trials and two other compounds slated for human trials in the coming months. The drugs are slated, respectively, to test the treatment of infection, high cholesterol and liver cancer. Others, such as startup **RXi Pharmaceuticals** in Worcester, are in a much earlier stage of development, and many developers are still exploring how best to use an RNAi treatment to target a disease in the most effective, targeted way.

Dicerna's technology looks to harness RNAi at an earlier point in its development process than drugs currently being developed. Dicerna believes that an earlier intervention can create more potent drugs that are more easily targeted at all kinds of diseases.

“This is significant in a field such as this where (drug delivery) challenges are still to be overcome,” Jenson said.

Doug Fambrough, a general partner at **Oxford Bioscience Partners** in Boston and one of Dicerna’s principal investors, said the technology was a relatively easy sell to investors. Abingworth and Skyline Ventures also participated in the initial round.

“This company was the easiest company to raise money for in nine years of venture capital,” Fambrough said.

He said RNAi continues to be a strong investor sell because it is “one of the hottest fields in biotechnology and it is very hard to get access to it because the intellectual property landscape is so tight.”

Companies are certainly interested. Merck & Co. Inc. (NYSE: MRK) last year agreed to pay \$1.1 billion for Sirna Therapeutics, a California based RNAi company.

Dicerna’s technology was developed in California and Iowa. Jenson, who helped lead efforts to form a company around the concepts, said he was eager to launch Dicerna in Massachusetts.

“We are able to recruit high-skilled people here very readily,” the Sudbury resident said. “This is an extraordinary place in which to launch a company.”

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