In Vivo
Pharma Intelligence

Ellipses Accelerates Cancer Treatment R&D With 'Unique' Business Model

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By Ayisha Sharma

EMERGING COMPANY PROFILE: THE UK BIOTECH is working to expedite its portfolio of acquired drug candidates for cancer through the clinic before out-licensing to big pharma in a bid to bring patients the treatments they need sooner rather than later.

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Ellipses Pharma Ltd.'s unusual business model comprises three steps – acquisition, development and out-licensing – taken in a bid to speed up and support the development of promising cancer drug candidates.

The firm was founded in 2015 by Sir Christopher Evans and Rajan Jethwa who now act as chairman and CEO, respectively. Unlike many companies that use scientific platforms to discover and develop drugs in-house, Ellipses is solely focused on acquiring assets from other firms and advancing them to or through the clinic via a streamlined process to bring novel treatments to cancer patients as soon as possible.

"We're not prioritizing cell therapies at this point but we will begin to look at them more later down the line," Evans told Scrip. Otherwise, Ellipses is largely agnostic as to drug mechanism or tumor type. When selecting assets for acquisition, "we look at what research is being done on the particular platform or group of compounds and whether there's a lead compound from the group that looks encouraging," Evans explained.

"We're interested in drugs that address unmet clinical needs, for example, those targeted to tumors or patients that tend to escape mechanisms and become resistant," chief medical officer Hendrik-Tobias Arkenau told Scrip. The firm also crowdsources unbiased opinion from its global scientific affairs group, which comprises just over 190 cancer experts across 40 specialities, helping it to de-risk asset selection.

Ellipses' current portfolio comprises seven candidates with five in the clinic and two in preclinical development; these are a mixture of small-molecule drugs, large-molecule drugs and nanoparticle drug conjugates.

One noteworthy contender is a RET tyrosine kinase inhibitor in clinical development for the treatment of non-small-cell lung cancer and thyroid cancer, EP0031. The first patient in a US-based Phase I/II trial of the candidate was dosed at the end of last year.

"We in-licensed EP0031 from Sichuan-Kelun Biotech, a successful Chinese pharmaceutical company" Arkenau said, adding that while the candidate was already in Phase I development in China, Ellipses had "identified a global need for next-generation RET inhibitors." There are already some launched products that target RET, such as Eisai Co., Ltd./Merck & Co., Inc.'s Lenvima (lenvatinib), but these tend not to be potent against the full range of RET fusions and mutations.

Emerging Company Profile

Company Name
Ellipses Pharma

Location
London, UK

Disease Area(s)
Oncology

Founding Date
2015

Founders
- Sir Chris Evans
- Rajan Jethwa

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Regarding financial position, Evans said, "we've got a lot of money in our bank and could pay for the running of the company for the next several years without any hesitation at all." This means that for any additional investment Ellipses raises, "one hundred percent of that cash goes straight into the clinical trials that we are developing," he added.

After acquiring an asset, Ellipses works to enhance the efficiency of its development, starting off by designing high-quality trials using an 'omics-driven' approach, which covers a range of biological disciplines including genomics, proteomics and metabolomics.

The firm also takes advice from its scientific affairs group at the trial planning stage before turning to its in-house drug development team to drive patient recruitment strategies. Ellipses then appoints its specialist trial managers to each trial to act as a direct representative between the CRO and trial centre. Its scalable approach means it can juggle the advancement of multiple trials at the same time.

By accelerating trial completion, regardless of asset stage, Ellipses helps reduce R&D costs for potential partners. The firm then out-licenses its assets to big pharma companies equipped to deal with the latter stages of development and commercialization. Prior to out-licensing, "we would have already spent months, if not years, looking at who is active in a particular cancer R&D space amongst big pharma," Evans said.

"We would shortlist two or three big pharma as primary targets for partnership discussions and frankly, they would expect us to come to them," Evans continued, adding Ellipses' approach is far from scattergun in nature.

Cycle To Continue Long-Term

As for the long-term vision for Ellipses, Evans said that once the cycle of acquisition, development and out-licensing has been completed and the firm's model is established, he hopes to continue the cycle repeatedly to expedite as many cancer treatments as possible. "In doing so, we'll improve and saving the lives of millions of cancer patients," he concluded.