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PAGE 1 OF 7

Ambit Hits A Triple, Signs BMS, GSK, Pfizer To Deals

By Randall Osborne
West Coast Editor

Ambit Biosciences Inc.'s super-multi-tasking approach to kinase screening bagged the company deals with three of pharma's top players – Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., GlaxoSmithKline plc and Pfizer Inc.

The deals with New York-based Bristol-Myers and GSK, of London, are similar insofar as both involve using Ambit's kinase platform – which consists of a fast-expanding panel of more than 170 assays – to profile target specificity for compounds.

"We have assays we haven't added to the panel yet," said Scott Salka, CEO of San Diego-based Ambit. "We'll easily attain 250 in the high-throughput format by the middle of the year."

With Pfizer, of New York, privately held Ambit will use its Reverse Screening methodology, which screens small

See Ambit, Page 4

Financing Roundup

Amylin Publicly Raises $176M To Fund Symlin, Exenatide Plans

By Aaron Lorenzo
Washington Editor

A public offering netted $176 million for Amylin Pharmaceuticals Inc., which plans to use the funds to expand its commercialization capabilities in advance of regulatory action on its two lead product candidates, Symlin and exenatide. Both diabetes drugs are under FDA review.

In the transaction, the San Diego-based company sold 8 million common shares for $22 apiece. The deal also included a 1.2 million-share overallotment option for the underwriters, good for 30 days. The sale's per-share price represented a slight discount to the prior day's $22.26 closing bid on the stock, and on Friday, the shares (NASDAQ:AMLN) gained 40 cents to close at $22.66.

Company officials did not return calls seeking comment.

See Financings, Page 6

Blame Your Mother

Mutations In Mitochondrion Affect Prostate Cancer Risk

By Anette Breindl
Science Editor

At first blush, it sounds like molecular biological Freudianism: It's all mother's fault.

In this particular permutation of the theory, it's her subpar DNA that's to blame for her offspring's cancer. Or, to be exact, the offspring's mitochondrial DNA, which is inherited exclusively from the mother because it resides in the cytoplasm.

Mitochondrial DNA mutations are known to play a role in some cancers, but because of the distribution of cells with vs. without mutations, they were assumed to be acquired rather than inherited. New research from scientists at Emory University, the Winship Cancer Institute and the Veteran's Affairs Medical Center, all in Atlanta, as well as the University of California at Irvine, might begin to

See Prostate, Page 5

Schering-Plough Plans Buyout Of Platform Firm NeoGenesis

By Randall Osborne
West Coast Editor

Having closely collaborated with NeoGenesis Pharmaceuticals Inc. since 1999, Schering-Plough Corp. decided to make the relationship more like a marriage by acquiring most of the firm's assets for an undisclosed sum.

"It's a natural progression when things go that well," said Henry Skinner, president and CEO of Cambridge, Mass.-based NeoGenesis, calling the Schering-Plough relationship "our longest-standing" continuous partner. Another appealing aspect was "the human capital, which in our case is very high," he said.

The deal, subject to the usual conditions, is expected to close later this quarter, and Rosemarie Yancosek, director of global communications for Madison, N.J.-based Schering-

See NeoGenesis, Page 7

Ambit

Continued from Page 1

molecules across a large fraction of all human proteins, to identify and characterize targets of Pfizer compounds and figure out mechanisms of action.

"We're taking some molecules they've identified that exert interesting effects in assays," Salka explained. "In one sense, it's a more specific deal around a particular set of compounds. With GSK, BMS and [an earlier deal with F. Hoffman-La Roche Ltd.], we may be getting many, many compounds from them over a multiyear period, and assaying them against a whole panel of kinases."

Ambit's typical turnaround, he said, "is a matter of two or three days, from receipt of compounds to delivery of data. We do more assays at a lower cost, faster than anybody."

No financial terms of any of the deals were disclosed.

Salka acknowledged that Ambit had been rather quiet for about two years until last summer, when it made public a screening deal for small-molecule kinase inhibitors with Roche, of Basel, Switzerland, at the same time closing the first round of a Series C financing to raise more than $21 million. (See *BioWorld Today,* Aug. 27, 2004.)

"We were kind of lying low, staying under the radar, because we were engaged in the very difficult work of taking an idea hatched in academia and converting that into a commercially attractive platform technology," he told *BioWorld Today*. "That takes some time."

Meanwhile, Ambit without fanfare had undertaken pilot programs with pharma companies, including GSK.

"That's the longest-running one," he said. "They came in when the technology was at its most nascent," in January 2003. At the time, the assay panel included only about 30, Salka said. Ambit opted not to make public the pilot programs.

"That can work against you," Salka noted. "The technology may work as advertised, and then for completely strategic reasons [the pharma company] could opt not to expand it into a full blown deal. Then you have to convince people that's why it happened, not that your technology didn't work."

Although Ambit operates in a space similar to Invitrogen Corp., of Carlsbad, Calif. (which this month signed an agreement to buy South San Francisco-based Zymed Laboratories Inc. for $60 million) and the Upstate Group Inc., of Charlottesville, Va. (acquired last fall by Atlanta-based Serologicals Corp.), Salka's firm isn't limiting itself to fee-for-service work, nor is it looking for a buyout.

"We've had a couple of opportunities to sell the platform to pharma companies," he said. "But the real value is in applying this technology platform to the creation of a robust pipeline."

The deals are strategic, he added, and designed to get Ambit into drug development.

"We already are," he said, pointing to a small-molecule neuroprotectant for the treatment of stroke and other central nervous system disorders that is expected to enter the clinic in late 2005. Small-molecule kinase-inhibitors for cancer will begin testing in 2006.

"For our most advanced kinase inhibitor program, we expect to file an [investigational new drug application] within the next four quarters," he said. The compound is "quite advanced, potent, specific, and works well in animal models. We're marching down that path." ■