

DormaTarg gets \$2M grant

by April Wilkerson

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DormaTarg's Robert Hurst, left, president; Dr. Michael Ehnat, center, chief of drug development; in the back from left, Nick Stefanko, chief financial officer; Paul Hauser, research scientist; Nina Dolese, intern; and Kris Vermelis, director of business development. (Maike Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – The local company DormaTarg has taken another significant step along the costly and risky journey of drug development.

DormaTarg, whose mission is to prevent cancer recurrence by killing suppressed cancer cells before they reactivate, recently received a \$2 million grant. The money comes from the competitive Small Business Innovative Research (SBIR) program and will boost the company's work toward filing an investigational new drug claim.

DormaTarg was formed in 2007 from science coming from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. The company's leadership feels good about its progress because it is ahead of the curve on a novel approach.

"I think the strength of our approach is that we have something new here," said Robert Hurst, Ph.D., president and co-founder of DormaTarg. "We're going after a new target that nobody else is going for. In fact, it's been only a couple of years ago that people even recognized it was possible."

DormaTarg's focus is attacking cancer in a different way than killing primary tumors. Primary tumors aren't what kill people – rather, the spreading metastatic tumors kill people, and they are generally resistant, Hurst said.

Hurst had been doing work on how cancer cells interact with normal tissue when he had an idea.

"When these cells spread, they don't grow immediately – the normal environment suppresses them," said Hurst, a faculty member in the Department of Urology at OU College of Medicine.

Hurst teamed with Michael Ehnat, Ph.D., from OU's College of Pharmacy, to see if they could design a screening technique to look for compounds that would specifically kill cancer cells within the normal environment.

DormaTarg's SBIR grant is for its breast cancer work, but the company also is looking at pancreatic cancer and bladder cancer.

The company's work stands to be a game-changer because there are no drugs available that actively treat metastasized cancer, Ehnat said.

"There hasn't been anything come out to directly attack it," he said. "Anything that does is serendipitous. And it's the metastases that kill you."

Prostate cancer has recently been in the spotlight because of new screening recommendations, and it provides an example of DormaTarg's focus. Hurst said men have been undergoing prostate surgery in their 50s, but it often doesn't alter the final result. Two large studies have shown that 10 to 15 years after surgery, the cancer returns in 60 percent of men, he said. Eight years after that, they have advanced cancer, around the same age if they'd never had surgery.

That means they've undergone surgery and emotional upheaval only to have the same outcome. But if DormaTarg's therapy can one day target the recurrence of cancer, perhaps life could be extended.

"The way cancer spreads is that you get your first tumor, and quite early in the game, it starts splitting off cells," Hurst said. "That's why our conventional therapies don't work – it's already spread. Your best chance of getting cured of cancer is your surgeon. Our idea is that if we can attack these little ticking time bombs – the cells that have spread – and either keep them suppressed or kill them, we have a chance of altering the course of therapy."

DormaTarg's efforts have coalesced with another OU program – the Center for the Creation of Economic Wealth, which began in 2006. The program pairs students with entrepreneurial activities for their mutual benefit. Kris Vermelis and Nick Stefanko helped write DormaTarg's business plan and continue as director of business development and director of finance, respectively.

DormaTarg has added five jobs since it began, and although it may one day team with a large pharmaceutical company, it hopes to keep its efforts – and job creation – in Oklahoma, Hurst said.

The road to drug development is long and fraught with roadblocks. Vermelis said the company has been boosted by several state grants from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST). The latest SBIR grant (the company's second) is another step toward moving out of the pre-clinical trials phase. But much more money will be necessary.

"It's very high-risk," Vermelis said. "You don't have a product at the beginning – you have research and development. At the very end of this eight- to 10-year trip, you have a product and you can start your sales. So it's the complete inverse of the traditional business model."

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