

## Proximity matters

By Steve Edelson, Executive Editor

**Roche** and **sanofi-aventis Group** have announced separate translational research deals with two universities in recent weeks, providing a glimpse into how the pharma companies are implementing their global efforts to access early-stage research. The deals—Roche partnered with nearby **University of Basel** and sanofi-aventis with the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**—share the common thread of a pharma company staying in close proximity to its network of academic collaborators.

sanofi-aventis' deal with MIT's Center for Biomedical Innovation is tied to the pharma's Prospective and Strategic Initiatives Group, which has placed senior personnel in academic hot spots, such as Cambridge, Mass.

The group is tasked with finding and evaluating fresh science in those academic ecosystems and then determining which of sanofi-aventis' units would most benefit from an innovation.

“Our approach is to closely work with faculty to find what's interesting for us,” said Sridaran Natesan, sanofi-aventis' head of external innovation and partnering in the U.S. “We want to find common ground so that both sides have their needs met, and then we fund the research.”

For example, under the deal with MIT, Natesan noted that the pharma's first step was hiring a dedicated person to manage the collaboration. The next move will be sending the university's faculty a request for proposals for one- to three-year projects in the areas of nanotechnology for drug delivery and biologics manufacturing.

Funding decisions will come from a six-person steering committee: three people each from the academic and the company sides. “We'll put milestones in place at the start, and upon completion of the projects, we can potentially take the discoveries forward by licensing them,” said Natesan.

Stacy Springs, director of MIT's biomanufacturing research program and alliance manager for the sanofi-aventis Biomedical Innovation Program, said the pharma will contribute \$4.2 million to the partnership, of which \$3.6 million will go toward biomedical innovation funding awards.

“sanofi has a strong strategic interest in our biologics and nanotechnology areas—there was a confluence of their needs and our strengths in those areas,” she said.

In 2009, sanofi-aventis set up similarly structured deals with the **Salk Institute for Biological Studies** for the development of induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells and with the **California Institute of Technology** for nanotechnology and imaging projects. “We also have scouting groups in China, India, Germany and France. We're evaluating other areas as well,” Natesan told *SciBX*.

### Diversity

Roche's partnerships with academia have been relatively more diverse. Indeed, the pharma's recent deal with the University of Basel is dramatically different from the research hub Roche established in Singapore in January.

Under the latter deal, Roche and collaborating Singaporean institutions will invest CHF100 million (\$96.2 million) to establish The Hub for Translational Medicine in Singapore. Without elaborating on the details, the parties say the goal is to expand knowledge of disease biology to accelerate development of personalized treatment approaches.

Collaborating with Roche are the **Agency for Science, Technology and Research** (A\*STAR), the **National University of Singapore**, the **National University Hospital**, **Nanyang Technological University**, the **National Healthcare Group** and **Singapore Health Services Pte Ltd**. The hub initially will employ 30 researchers.

In contrast to the sprawling alliance in Singapore, Roche thinks its deal with the University of Basel “is a model we can build up with midsize universities, where there are low administrative hurdles and a joint steering committee can quickly get the right people connected and can get projects progressing,” said Andreas Wallnoefer, global head of pRED development.

Pharma Research & Early Development (pRED) was formally launched in January as one of Roche's autonomous centers, alongside Genentech Early Research & Development (gRED).

Previously, Roche had deals with the University of Basel on a one-off basis. Now, said Wallnoefer, “the idea is to put emphasis on the translational aspect of these projects and to include clinicians in the hospital and people at the biomedical research center.”

The focus of the new partnership with the university is the cellular basis of diseases in metabolism and neuroscience, although Wallnoefer noted that the deal also could include programs in immunology.

A common thread among all of Roche's translational science deals is that the pharma hopes to glean “a better understanding of disease mechanisms that help us direct our own research to better targets and to validate the clinical relevance of targets we are investigating. We hope to get closer to the forefront of innovation because that mostly happens in academia,” said Wallnoefer.

“These won't be fee-for-service deals where the university is just running experiments for us. Also, these are not transactional deals. We do have a pharma partnering group that is transactionally accessing new targets, but I'm coming from the R&D organization and our focus is designing translational research programs. Out of these, transactional deals can arise, but our focus is on joint collaborations,” Wallnoefer added. “Once we agree on an area of interest, we'll design joint programs where Roche will contribute not only money but also in-house resources and technologies.”

The upshot, Wallnoefer told *SciBX*, is that all of Roche's translational deals are “major commitments in terms of attention and resources. I can't say how many such deals we have the metabolism for. The focus now is making the ones we do have effective, although we are discussing other deals in the U.S., Europe and Asia.”

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#### COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED

**Agency for Science, Technology and Research**, Singapore  
**California Institute of Technology**, Pasadena, Calif.  
**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**, Cambridge, Mass.  
**Nanyang Technological University**, Singapore

**National Healthcare Group**, Singapore  
**National University Hospital**, Singapore  
**National University of Singapore**, Singapore  
**Roche** (SIX:ROG; OTCQX:RHHBY), Basel, Switzerland  
**Salk Institute for Biological Studies**, La Jolla, Calif.  
**sanofi-aventis Group** (Euronext:SAN; NYSE:SNY), Paris, France  
**Singapore Health Services Pte Ltd.**, Singapore  
**University of Basel**, Basel, Switzerland