

DOWJONES
VentureWire Alert

venture market summary

By Yuliya Chernova

Gene silencing as a base for drugs, the new hope in pharmaceuticals, has until now been more theory than reality. But Acuity Pharma is the first to make the step toward drug development by beginning to test RNA interference-based therapeutics in humans. With \$16 million in Series B funds from venture capital and industry backers, the small firm expects to carry through safety trials of its compound, targeting age-related macular degeneration, within months and then to go on to proving efficacy.

Though the company faces many rivals among pharmas looking to fight this major cause of preventable blindness, its method is unlike the competition. The hope is that the drug might work by turning off specific disease-causing genes. Should it succeed, it would show that the recent, and accidental, biological discovery could be the clue to fighting unwavering medical foes, from cancer to viral infections like HIV and Hepatitis C. To begin testing gene silencing therapies against age-related macular degeneration makes sense, due to the easily accessed and enclosed nature of the eye.

But other pharmas are on Acuity's heels, and the field is starting to sort out intellectual property claims. Just this week venture capital-backed Nucleonics Inc., of Malvern, Pa., filed a request with the patent office challenging the validity of patents held by Benitec Ltd., an RNA interference pharma in Australia. In March Benitec initiated an intellectual property lawsuit against a number of companies such as Nucleonics, Ambion Inc. and Genscript Corp.