



Mitch Gold orchestrates \$48M round for Alpine's next-gen immunotherapy play

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Most biotechs go after a launch round and then look for a high-profile industry collaboration. But most biotechs aren't run by Mitch Gold.

The former Dendreon CEO and current venture capitalist has pieced together a \$48 million A round for Alpine Immune Sciences in Seattle, which will now look to carve out a distinctive place for itself in the booming immunotherapy arena. The A round follows a \$535 million partnership—it starts with a modest \$5 million upfront—to amp up Kite Pharma's autologous cell therapies with better tech.

OrbiMed Advisors led the round, with Frazier Healthcare Partners and Gold's Alpine BioVentures stepping in. Alpine provided the seed cash to set it up.

One of the big ideas at Alpine is to offer custom engineering work for the cell therapies now in the pipeline. Kite, crosstown Seattle biotech Juno and others have been adapting T cells into cancer weapons. And Alpine's top scientists—Ryan Swanson and Michael Kornacker, who both left Amgen after the big biotech opted to shutter its Seattle campus—have come up with some new tech that they believe can make CAR-Ts and TCRs better equipped to hunt down and destroy cancer cells.

Swanson and Kornacker have been studying the immune synapse, or intercellular communications channel, between cells, exploring the interactions on surface proteins in coordinating an attack. Alpine also believes that re-engineered proteins can be used to go after multiple targets, replacing antibodies with smaller, more versatile assault weapons, which will be the focus of its VlgD platform.

The whole focus in cancer R&D is centered around hitting multiple targets with combination therapies, says Gold. "We do that by hitting the natural ligands present in the synapse," he tells me.

Right now the company still has fewer than 20 staffers, adds the interim CEO, but it's growing, targeting a launch of its first clinical effort sometime in 2018.

In addition to oncology, Alpine says the reengineered proteins have the ability to play a role in autoimmune conditions as well as infectious diseases.

Under Gold, Dendreon famously persisted and won FDA approval for Provenge, a pioneering personalized cancer therapy cheered for launching a fresh attack on prostate cancer but ultimately unable to compete well enough to pay off the debt it had accumulated. Gold departed in 2012, the company foundered, went into bankruptcy and wound up in the hands of Valeant, a bottom feeder in biopharma that's now struggling to survive as well.

I asked Gold what he learned from that experience that would help him in starting new companies like Alpine.

He replied that getting Provenge to market was a long, grueling journey that required plenty of "grit and perseverance to take a new technology forward."

The technology may change, but the determination always has to be there.