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Ex-GSK rare disease head moves to Genenta

by Ben Adams | Jan 19, 2017 6:31am



Although leaving GSK last year, Russo is coming back closer to his old company with the Genenta move

Carlo Russo has joined a growing list of ex-GlaxoSmithKline staffers moving into biotech after working on and helping launch the Big Pharma's rare disease drug Strimvelis, although he does edge closer back to his old company.

He joins Milan, Italy-based Genenta Science, a biotech focused on hematopoietic stem cell gene therapy in cancer, as its new CMO.

Russo has worked on gene therapy before as he was head of R&D at London-based GSK's rare disease unit, helping get its first gene therapy Strimvelis, for the incredibly rare "**bubble boy syndrome**," approved in Europe last year.

He was more recently the CMO at gene therapy biotech Annapurna Therapeutics, and before GSK the president and CEO of Vaxinnate after his stint at Merck Research Laboratories.

There are other GSK/Strimvelis vets, namely Andrea Spezzi and Nicolas Koebel, who have moved from the company into smaller biotech.

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They both now work at Fierce 15 winner **Orchard Therapeutics**, Spezzi as CMO and Koebel as SVP of business operations, and are working on a rival drug to Strimvelis using a lentivirus approach that they believe will be better, safer and easier to use for patients.

Koebel was at GSK for 10 years, until 2015. In 2011, he was appointed global commercial lead to GSK's Rare Diseases Unit, to oversee the commercialization of GSK's program of autologous ex vivo gene therapies.

Spezzi, meanwhile, served as VP and medicine development leader at GSK's Rare Diseases Unit, after working for Takeda as its global medical director for R&D.

Strimvelis was developed at Italy's San Raffaele Telethon Institute for Gene Therapy and the Milanese biotech MolMed, which is based at the Institute, in a deal with GSK stretching back to 2010.

Genenta has in fact been working with Luigi Naldini, director of the San Raffaele-Telethon Institute for Gene Therapy, for their med, meaning there is still something of a connection between the biotech and GSK.

FierceBiotech learned several months ago that there could be more departures from GSK's rare disease unit, and specifically around those who have worked on the Strimvelis program. A source told me last year that there were "issues" arising from the program that was leading to the exits, but did not elaborate further.

It's unclear as to why Russo left the unit and GSK last year, and to what extent he will or will not work GSK in the future, given its partnership with the Institute.

Back in 2015, Genenta said it had raised \$11 million for its work on a new gene therapy. According to a brief release, the biotech said that Banca Esperia, the private bank of Mediobanca and Mediolanum, supported the A round.

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