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# MaxThera making the most of anti-bioterror grant

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By [Dyke Hendrickson](#)

A Beverly spinout of Oscient Pharmaceuticals Corp. has landed an anti-bioterrorism grant that bolsters research begun at the larger company.

The \$1.45 million funding, received by MaxThera Inc., validates the instincts of company president and founder Ania Knap.

Oscient, a Waltham biopharmaceutical company that formed through the merger of Genome Therapeutics and Genesoft Pharmaceuticals, changed its corporate focus when it changed its name. Oscient officials say it went from being a drug discovery company to a commercialization and distribution company.

As part of that refocus, the company dropped some of its research projects. Knap, a research-team leader there, negotiated a license agreement with Oscient to enable her to continue work on part of Oscient's "inactive" portfolio of drug candidates.

A year ago, she launched MaxThera, which has the motto of "beating antibiotic resistance by design." Oscient is a minority investor in the new company.

"I am delighted we have this opportunity to continue developing these programs," Knap said. "As principal investigator in its formative stages, I saw great potential in this research."

MaxThera received its grant from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and was the only New England company to receive such funding. A dozen other companies nationwide received similar grants.

The money is part of funding from Operation Bioshield, the federal program committing \$6 billion over five years to develop methods and materials to respond to bioterrorism.

Federal officials say these first grants, which range in duration from 12 to 18 months, are designed to develop therapeutics and vaccines against "some of the most deadly agents of bioterrorism,"

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such as anthrax, botulinum toxin, Ebola virus, pneumonic plague, smallpox and tularemia.”

Knap, who earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from Wesleyan University, had been a research scientist with Novartis and Amgen before joining Genome Therapeutics, which became Oscient.

She was a senior director in charge of discovery at Genome Therapeutics before leaving during the company’s reorganization in 2003. She launched MaxThera a year ago.

MaxThera’s strategy is to limit resistance emergence to combine the use of these new targets in biosynthetic pathways — essential for bacterial survival — with novel structural classes of compounds.

This combination of targets and compounds is designed to “reset the antibiotic-resistance time clock that hampers the fight against infectious diseases.”

Industry analysts say corporate research is often “repurposed” when an initial research plan is thwarted. Dr. David Barash, a physician-consultant who runs Concord Healthcare Strategies LLC, said, “Thalidomide has had a recent resurgence as an anti-inflammatory agent, anti-angiogenesis agent, and anti-neoplastic. Sirolimus was first studied for transplants before being used in stents, but Wyeth held on to it. They licensed it to J&J (Johnson & Johnson).”

Knap said part of the federal grant will be used to hire staff this fall.

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