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Astex, The Wellcome Trust, The Institute of Cancer Research and Cancer Research Technology announce major cancer drug discovery collaboration

Cambridge UK, 22nd March 2004. Astex Technology, the fragment-based drug discovery company, together with The Wellcome Trust, the Institute of Cancer Research and Cancer Research Technology today announced an exclusive collaboration relating to the discovery of novel drugs against the cancer target BRAF.

BRAF was first identified as a key target implicated in a variety of cancers in 2002 when scientists from The Institute of Cancer Research, in partnership with scientists from the Cancer Genome Project at The Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute in Cambridge, discovered that the gene is involved in up to 70% of certain cancer types including malignant melanoma.

The Institute of Cancer Research, The Wellcome Trust and Cancer Research Technology began a drug discovery collaboration in 2003 to identify BRAF inhibitors, and have now been joined by Astex who will contribute expertise in fragment based drug discovery to the collaboration. Under the terms of the agreement, the partners have established a joint research team to identify and develop novel drug candidates for major indications in oncology. This programme will combine the expertise of the partners in fragment-based drug discovery, cancer biology and the preclinical and clinical development of cancer drugs.

Dr Harren Jhoti, Founder and CSO of Astex said, "We are extremely pleased to be part of this world-class team in this important and exciting new therapeutic opportunity for cancer. We look forward to developing novel drugs targeted against BRAF and bringing these to the clinic quickly with the expert support of our collaborators."

Dr Ted Bianco, Director, Technology Transfer, The Wellcome Trust, said "There is excellent synergy between the collaborating parties. Astex's structure-based approach to drug discovery is highly complementary to the cancer therapeutic resources of the other parties. In partnership we can speed-up the drug development process and reach the clinic earlier"

Professor Peter Rigby, Chief Executive of The Institute of Cancer Research commented: "This collaboration holds great promise for future anti-cancer drug development. Here at The Institute we have been responsible for isolating more cancer genes, and taking more anti- cancer drugs into clinical trials than any other academic organisation in the world. We are delighted that our experts will be working alongside other world leaders in the field to develop drugs in the laboratory which can quickly be translated into patient benefit."

"This partnership further exemplifies CRTs role in bringing benefit to cancer patients by forming partnerships between cancer researchers and industry to accelerate the development of new therapies. Astex's technologies and resources will add significantly to the rate of progress of the programme." said Keith Blundy, COO of Cancer Research Technology.

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Notes to editors:

Melanoma usually occurs in individuals who have been exposed to the sun, x-rays, or ultraviolet (UV) light for prolonged periods and is one of the deadliest forms of skin cancer accounting for just 11 percent of skin cancers, but almost all of the deaths. The incidence of malignant melanoma has doubled in the last decade with worldwide estimates in excess of 100,000 per annum and responsible for more than 7,000 deaths in the US and 1600 deaths in the UK each year.

Following the release of the human genome sequence - one third of which was generated at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute - the Cancer Genome Project team embarked on a screen to identify which of our 30,000 genes are involved in cancer. Amongst the first 20 genes they looked at the researchers found preliminary evidence that the BRAF gene was mutated. The gene was then studied in approximately 1000 different cancer samples.

Normally, BRAF acts as a component of a chain of control switches that must all be 'on' for a cell to grow and divide. Collaborators at The Institute of Cancer Research, in the Cancer Research UK Centre for Cell and Molecular Biology, showed that the mutation renders BRAF active all the time so it is no longer responsive to the signals that should control it, and the affected cells can multiply unchecked, leading to cancer.

BRAF was found to be mutated in about 70 percent of malignant melanomas, 10 percent of colon cancers and a smaller proportion of other cancer types. The BRAF gene consists of about 2200 letters of DNA code. Remarkably, most of the mutations in the BRAF gene involve the same single letter of DNA.

Because mutated BRAF is permanently stuck in the 'on' position the collaboration will look to develop specific inhibitors that will switch it back off. These drugs would be expected to stop the growth of these cancers.

About Astex

Astex is a fragment-based drug discovery company pioneering the use of high-throughput X-ray crystallography for the rapid identification of novel drug candidates. The Company's unique fragment-based drug discovery approach, termed Pyramidä, utilizes protein crystal structures to detect the binding of drug fragments, which are then optimized into potent lead compounds. Facilitating this approach is Astex's integrated drug discovery platform, which covers all aspects of structure-based drug discovery including protein production, crystallization, structure determination, bioinformatics, computational and medicinal chemistry and biology and DMPK. Astex is focusing its drug discovery approaches on proprietary and public domain protein targets from families and/or pathways. This includes validated kinases, phosphatases and proteases implicated in human disease. Astex has drug discovery collaborations with Boehringer Ingelheim, Schering AG,

AstraZeneca, Mitsubishi Pharma, the Institute of Cancer Research and Cancer Research Technology. The Company has further research agreements with AstraZeneca, Aventis Pharmaceuticals, Mitsubishi Pharma and Fujisawa Pharma focused on solving and utilising novel cytochrome P450 crystal structures. For further information on Astex please visit the Company's website at www.astex-technology.com

About the Wellcome Trust Limited

The Wellcome Trust is an independent research-funding charity established in 1936 under the will of tropical medicine pioneer Sir Henry Wellcome. The Trust's mission is to promote research with the aim of improving human and animal health and it currently spends more than £400m p.a. The Technology Transfer Division manages the charity's intellectual property portfolio and related matters and also provides "greenhouse" translation funding for early-stage healthcare technology development. Over 30 research and license agreements have been transacted and the Division has an interest in over 20 life science SME's located in the UK or US.

About The Institute of Cancer Research

The Institute of Cancer Research is a centre of excellence with leading scientists working on cutting edge research. It was founded in 1909 to carry out research into the causes of cancer and to develop new strategies for its prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care.

About Cancer Research Technology Limited

Cancer Research Technology Limited (CRT) is a specialist technology transfer company which aims to develop new discoveries in cancer research for the benefit of cancer patients. CRT is wholly owned by Cancer Research UK, the largest independent funder of cancer research in the world. CRT works closely with leading international cancer scientists and their institutes to protect intellectual property arising from their research and to establish links with commercial partners. CRT facilitates the discovery, development and marketing of new cancer therapeutics, vaccines, diagnostics and enabling technologies.

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