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Bicara debuts with $40M from Biocon to bankroll bifunctional antibodies

By Amirah Al Idrus
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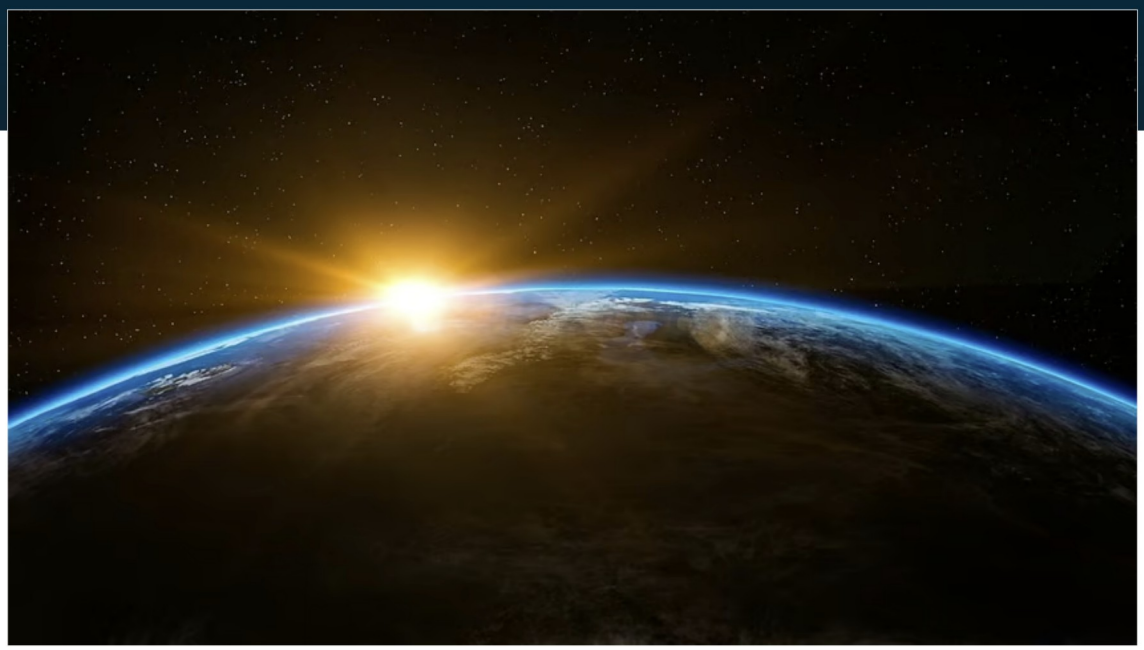
checkpoint inhibitors | combination therapy | immuno-oncology | venture capital (VC)



Bicara Therapeutics is developing bifunctional antibodies for use alongside approved drugs such as checkpoint inhibitors as well as on their own. (Arek Socha)

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Though checkpoint inhibitors have become a game changer for certain cancers, they don't work for everyone—that's why so many companies are developing combination approaches to boost their efficacy. Bicara Therapeutics' strategy is to pair these drugs with bifunctional antibodies, which are designed to trigger a powerful immune response in and around the tumor but spare healthy cells from side effects.

Bicara launches with $40 million (https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210315005146/en/Bicara-Therapeutics-Launches-with-Deep-Pipeline-of-First-in-Class-Dual-Action-Biologics-for-Cancer-Immunotherapy) in seed money from Biocon, one of the top biopharma companies in India, to develop a pipeline of bifunctional antibodies. That includes lead program BC101, which zeroes in on EGFR-expressing cancer cells and blocks TGFβ, a protein that normally suppresses tumor growth but can be co-opted by cancer cells to promote their growth.

RELATED: ASCO: Roche's closely watched TIGIT combo shows 2 checkpoint inhibitors could be better than one (https://www.fiercebiotech.com/biotech/asco-roche-combo-shows-2-checkpoint-inhibitors-could-be-better-than-1)

Bicara is developing its bifunctional antibodies for use alongside approved drugs such as checkpoint inhibitors as well as on their own. It is testing BC101 alone and in combination with Merck's PD-1 blocker Keytruda in patients with advanced EGFR-expressing tumors whose cancer has stopped responding to the standard of care. The phase 1/2 study kicked off at sites in the U.S. and Canada in July 2020.

"Immune checkpoint inhibitors and targeted therapies have been important advances in cancer care—but unfortunately, far too many patients either fail to respond or stop responding as their tumors grow resistant. Our dual-action biologics have the potential to bring new hope to these patients," said Bicara CEO Claire Mazumdar, Ph.D., in a statement.

Bicara hopes its bifunctional antibodies will combat the immunosuppressive effects of the tumor microenvironment and spark an immune response to attack the cancer.

"We have brought together a team with deep experience in engineering complex biologics and a successful track record of developing FDA-approved drugs, and we're thrilled to be advancing through the clinic so quickly as we move with urgency to address the significant need for more effective cancer treatments," Mazumdar said.

RELATED: Mylan, Biocon undercut insulin competitors on price with launch of Lantus copycat (https://www.fiercepharma.com/pharma/mylan-biocon-undercut-insulin-competitors-price-launch-lantus-copycat)

Bicara's biologics engineering team is based in Bangalore, India, while its executive team is based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Its leadership includes President and Chief Operating Officer Ryan Cohlhepp who, along with Mazumdar, was part of the team that founded immnuno-metabolism biotech Rheos Medicines. Joining them are Chief Medical Officer Liviu Niculescu, M.D., Ph.D., an alum of bluebird bio, Takeda and Pfizer; Chief Scientific Officer Seng-Lai (Thomas) Tan, Ph.D., previously of Elstar and Forma Therapeutics; and Chief Financial Officer Ivan Hyep, who's worked at Bain Capital and Third Rock Ventures and who served as head of finance at Third Rock's Moma Therapeutics (https://www.fiercebiotech.com/biotech/moma-therapeutics-aims-at-molecular-machines-86m-raise).

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