

Preparing to Make its Mark

Rising firm Augurex Life Sciences Corp. says it 'unlocks' the potential of biomarker products.



CEO Norma K. Biln (left) co-founded Augurex Life Sciences Corp. in December 2006 with Chief Scientific Officer Dr. Anthony Marotta.

clinical and pharmaceutical sciences and Marotta's expertise in test development to build a company that can efficiently advance the development of biomarkers.

Advancing AGX 020

"Between December 2006 and October 2007, [we searched] worldwide research labs for biomarkers that fit our selection criteria as single, protein biomarkers that may fulfill unmet clinical needs, have good patentability, a significant market size," Biln remembers. "Our effort in identifying those 'diamonds in the rough' landed us our very exciting arthritis biomarker, AGX 020, which represents our founding technology.

"AGX 020 is a protein that is usually present 'inside' the cells of healthy people, but in arthritis patients, it is present 'outside' of the cells in the joint fluid," Biln says. "Because this protein is also measurable in blood, it is useful for diagnosing the disease and following its progression.

"Our successful research and development plans are clearly demonstrating the usefulness of this blood test in helping doctors manage arthritis patients and within the next six to nine months, we expect to place the biomarker with a commercial entity who will adapt the test components to their blood testing instruments to make it available on the market, possibly as early as 2010," she states.

A Novel Approach

"Augurex's approach to biomarker research is 'unconventional' in that we don't take a traditional route to blood test development," Biln says.

"Companies typically develop the commercial prototype of the test and then run all the patient studies on it.

"Because the prototype takes a long time to produce, companies may spend significant time and money on the development only to find that the actual protein that they want to measure provides limited clinical value," she says.

AUGUREX LIFE SCIENCES Corp. develops biomarkers, which are substances that indicate what is going on in the body, thereby making them useful for diagnosing and managing patients' diseases through the use of simple blood tests.

"Our lead biomarker is being developed to help physicians select the appropriate arthritis treatments for their patients and monitor the patients' arthritis progression over time," says Norma K. Biln, chief executive officer and co-founder of Augurex.

"In advancing biomarker development, Augurex 'fills the technology development gap' in that it takes a young product that large commercial companies would, at inception, consider too early-stage," Biln says. "We do the research and product development to unlock its clinical and commercial value and then license it to or place it with the companies that have the commercial reach and infrastructure to ensure that patients and the medical community have access to it through clinical labs."

A 14-year veteran of the life sciences sector, Biln co-founded the company in December 2006 with Chief Scientific Officer Dr. Anthony Marotta. Previously, the two worked together at Stressgen Biotechnologies, where they saw potential in combining Biln's skill set in

COMPANY PROFILE:

Augurex Life Sciences Corp.

► www.augurex.com

► **HQ:** North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

► **Employees:** 5

► **Service:** Biomarker development

► **Norma K. Biln, CEO and co-founder:** "I see Augurex as a key place where researchers will want to bring their early-stage biomarkers for advancement and where larger diagnostics companies will source out commercially promising technologies."

"At Augurex, we do the patient studies on an R&D-based test first and once we have proven that the biomarker is useful (and how it should be used), then we go on to have the commercial test produced," Biln says. Using this novel approach has piqued the interest of several researchers to collaborate with Augurex to advance their technology.

"As a young start-up company, Augurex has secured government funding to support its research, which represents over a third of our financing," she says. "That really assists in reducing cash burnrate, [by] helping get results without going back to the markets for financing or unnecessarily diluting shareholders.

"Another 'efficiency' that Augurex capitalizes on is the use of contract research organizations that it outsources work to," she says. "Utilizing local research organizations can expedite product advancement early-on and build faster value around the technology and for the company. This, of course, requires an R&D network and infrastruc-

ture to draw on, which we have the luxury of being able to do here in Vancouver."

The 'Place' To Be

Biln says that Augurex's co-founder, Dr. Anthony Marotta, has been key to the company's growth. In addition to holding a Ph.D. in experimental medicine, his corporate experience includes founding BioSun Solutions, a consulting firm for the biotechnology industry, and he possesses extensive expertise in test development.

Biln praises Marotta for his ability to think outside the box and remain efficient.

"In science, where a lot of things are trial and error, he's able to find a way to expedite our work and ensure that our milestones are met on time," she says. "[It's] a very unique profile that a lot of Ph.D.s/founders may not have. We have also been blessed with excellent employees who share in the strategic vision and are committed to efficiently advancing biomarker development."

She notes that Augurex sees a strong mar-

ket ahead with growing interest in biomarker products.

"So many investigators, clinicians [and] research-based companies are working in the area of biomarkers," Biln says.

"The FDA has stated in its Critical Path Opportunities report that the development and use of biomarkers is a priority in the advancement of life sciences technologies and drug development," she says. "The future of personalized medicine where a drug or therapy is tailored to an individual rather than to the general population and the need for the development of more innovative drugs are the main drivers that will contribute to the growth of the biomarker sector.

"Augurex will continue growing its biomarker product line in this thriving area of the life sciences," she says. "I see Augurex as a key place where researchers will want to bring their early-stage biomarkers for advancement and where larger diagnostics companies will source out commercially promising technologies." ■

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