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March 2009

by [Jeffrey Bouley](#) | [Email the author](#)[EDIT CONNECT:](#)

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SHARING OPTIONS:



AUSTIN, Texas—[Mirna Therapeutics](#) has been pretty quiet in terms of public announcements since it was launched a little under a year ago as a wholly-owned subsidiary of [Asuragen Inc.](#), with \$3 million in seed money from the parent company and exclusive access to all of Asuragen's intellectual property related to therapeutics. But that changed with the new year, and two recent announcements, made Jan. 28 and Feb. 3, that the company was embarking on a pair of microRNA (miRNA) collaborations with academia.

The first deal was penned with the [University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center](#) Science Park Research Center in Smithville, forging an effort to investigate miRNAs in human prostate cancer.

"Combining M. D. Anderson's extensive knowledge of prostate cancer biology with Asuragen's expertise using miRNA with therapeutic potential could lead to improved treatment options for prostate cancer," says Dr. Matt Winkler, CEO and CSO of Mirna Therapeutics, who calls the discovery of miRNAs "a paradigm-changing event in biology and medicine of a magnitude that only occurs once every decade or two."

The principal investigators for the study are Dr. Dean Tang, associate professor, Division of Carcinogenesis and adjunct associate professor, College of Pharmacy at the [University of Texas](#) and Dr. David Brown, Mirna's director of discovery.

Winkler described Tang as "a pioneer in identifying and characterizing prostate cancer stem cells and evaluating their role in the initiation, progression, and metastasis of human prostate cancer." Tang is actively pursuing therapeutic strategies for inducing senescence and apoptosis in prostate cancer stem cells.

Brown, for his part, brings experience developing technologies for the isolation, detection, and functional characterization of small RNA including miRNAs, and has been applying these technologies both at Mirna and Asuragen to identify miRNAs as diagnostic and therapeutic targets in human diseases, particularly cancer.

The second deal is with the [University of California, San Francisco \(UCSF\)](#) to evaluate the capacity of specific miRNAs to reduce or eliminate tumors in mouse models of cancer. The collaboration will include studies of cancer-related microRNAs that were discovered at both Mirna and UCSF as well as small RNAs that will be identified in research using mouse and cell models from UCSF.

Echoing Winkler's own enthusiasm for the potential of miRNAs, Dr. Andrei Goga, a UCSF assistant professor and member of the UCSF's [Helen Diller Comprehensive Cancer Center](#), calls microRNAs an "exciting new therapeutic targets for cancer therapy" and he expects the collaboration with Mirna to yield multiple novel tumor-associated miRNAs with potential therapeutic value.

Mirna Therapeutics maintains that the promise of miRNA therapy may be greatest in oncology applications because of the apparent role of miRNAs as tumor suppressors. Mirna has based this notion off the observations that miRNAs are frequently misregulated and expressed at altered levels in cancerous tissues when compared to normal tissues, misregulated miRNAs contribute to cancer development by functioning as oncogenes or tumor suppressors, and administration of miRNA induces a therapeutic response by blocking or reducing tumor growth in preclinical animal studies.

Another reason for putting energy into miRNAs for cancer therapy, the company notes, are the facts that miRNAs control multiple cellular pathways and therefore may have superior therapeutic activity and they are natural molecules and probably less prone to causing non-specific side effects.

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