

Amid Immunocore's C-suite bloodletting Glaxo provides solace



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Immunocore has recently been beset with multiple senior executive departures, but has managed to press on into phase I with a Glaxo-partnered asset.

Three years after closing a record-breaking \$320m private financing Immunocore is having a personnel crisis. The shock departure in February of its chief executive, Eliot Forster, has had a contagious effect, with various other execs, including chief medical and business officers and the finance director, swiftly following.

Fortunately Immunocore counts Glaxosmithkline among its partners, and this alliance has yielded an asset that today began its first clinical trial. This could provide a neat hook on which to hang the Immunocore investment case as the company seeks its next tranche of financing.

"We are exploring fund raising at the moment," Andrew Hotchkiss, who joined the group last October as chief commercial officer before taking on the interim chief executive role on Mr Forster's departure, told *Vantage* this morning.

However, he would not be drawn on how much of the \$320m series A - back in 2015 the largest private financing ever for a European biotech - remained in the bank. Immunocore got ["up to" \\$40m from the Gates Foundation in September](#), and Mr Hotchkiss said: "We are fully funded to achieve all our near-term goals."

These goals now include funding a 63-subject [phase I study of the Glaxo-partnered IMCnyeso](#), a soluble T-cell receptor asset targeting the same epitope on the related NY-ESO-1 and LAGE-1A antigens. After phase I ends, Mr Hotchkiss said, Glaxo can elect to take this asset on fully.

Financing

It will soon become clear if this is a sufficient endorsement to spur financing interest. Mr Forster's departure was rumoured to have been linked to aborted financing plans earlier this year, though Mr Hotchkiss rejected the connection, stating: "Eliot decided, with the board, that he'd achieved all he wanted to achieve here."

In May Immunocore's chief business officer, Eva Lotta-Allan, left to become chairman of C4X Discovery, and the following month saw the departure of Christina Coughlin, chief medical officer, who now has this role at Tmunity. Namir Hassan, vice-president and director of translational R&D, left Immunocore in July, and is now chief science officer at Zelluna Immunotherapy.

According to a [social media post](#) by Immunocore's former health and safety assistant there have been

redundancies also. And the most recent bombshell came last month, when the chief financial officer, Paul Fry, announced his decision to step down in October to head up finance at Vectura.

Mr Hotchkiss denied that there was a mass exodus from Immunocore. “Everyone has individual reasons,” he said, adding that rapid expansion was often accompanied by leadership changes, which he put down to “growing pains”.

Still, personnel might not be Immunocore’s only concern. [Glaxo recently took over development](#) of Adaptimmune’s engineered T-cell receptor asset GSK3377794, which also targets NY-ESO-1; it is likely that the big pharma company might soon have to choose between Adaptimmune and Immunocore.

Mr Hotchkiss stressed that all programmes were on track. Immunocore’s lead project, IMCgp100, is in pivotal studies for uveal melanoma, and two other wholly owned assets, IMC-C103C and IMC-F106C, targeting undisclosed antigens, should enter the clinic in the next 18 months.

“The company is transitioning from early research into becoming a fully integrated biotech,” said Mr Hotchkiss. If IMCgp100 generates good pivotal data the plan is to commercialise it in early 2020.

Woodford

The increased clinical push is understandable given that Immunocore is seeking more funds, and here the UK financier Neil Woodford will play a pivotal role. Mr Woodford’s beleaguered Woodford Patient Capital Trust [derives 5.32% of its value from Immunocore](#), having provided a big chunk of the \$320m series A.

The fund’s gross asset value is \$1.16bn, and its last reported Immunocore stake is 6.7%, implying that Immunocore is being carried at a \$920m valuation. One of the fears is that a future raise might have to be done as a down round – at a valuation below the carried value.

This might result in Mr Woodford recording a loss on his fund’s holding, a scenario he would likely rather avoid.