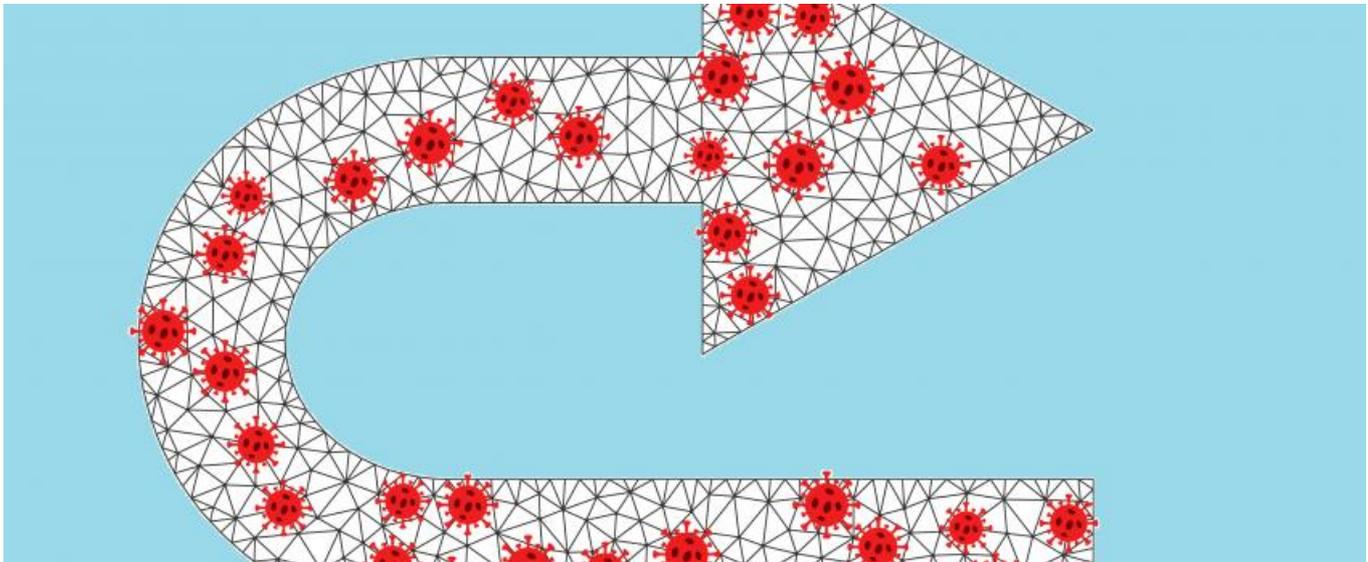


Roche U-turns and Adaptimmune wins



Jacob Plieth



A low-key cancer discovery alliance sees Roche abandoning its earlier opposition to cell therapies.

U-turns don't come much bigger than Roche getting into cell therapy. And today's deal with the engineered T-cell receptor specialist Adaptimmune signals Roche doing precisely that, even though at \$150m up front it will hardly break the bank.

With Adaptimmune stock still well off last year's highs – despite the group being on the cusp of its first US regulatory filing – now was clearly a logical time for Roche to strike. But the significance will not be lost on long-standing investors; back in 2015 Roche's then pharma chief, Daniel O'Day, had told *Evaluate Vantage* that cell therapy assets were too expensive, notwithstanding their scientific promise.

Of course much has changed in the intervening six years. Most notably Mr O'Day is no longer with Roche. He now heads up Gilead, a group that ironically is a major cell therapy player by virtue of its 2017 acquisition of Kite Pharma.

And today's statement from Adaptimmune quotes James Sabry, Roche's head of pharma partnering, as stating that allogeneic cell therapy could be “a game-changing approach”.

Off the shelf

Specifically the tie-up will see Roche and Adaptimmune work on up to five undisclosed targets, aiming to develop off-the-shelf T-cell therapies. Adaptimmune pockets \$150m immediately, followed by another \$150m over five years unless the deal is terminated.

The companies will also work on what they call “personalised” allogeneic T-cell therapies, without explaining further. It is possible that this will involve research on targets expressed in only a small number of patients, for instance, or will comprise a multi-target approach driven by analysing antigens expressed on individual patients' tumours.

Adaptimmune opened up 15% this morning, but T-cell therapies remain very much out of favour with investors. Instead, the markets have embraced NK cell approaches, causing scant data releases to drive companies including [Fate and Nkarta sky high](#). Perhaps the life sciences investor Brad Loncar best summed up Roche's approach.

Roche has the dough to acquire [\\$FATE](#) for \$10B but the brains to throw a few hundred million at [\\$ADAP](#) instead and see how the technology plays out.

— Brad Loncar (@bradloncar) [September 7, 2021](#)

If today's tie-up represents a change of heart from Roche, it also sees Adaptimmune's engineered work taking a slightly different turn. The UK biotech has focused mainly on autologous TCRs, the most advanced of which, afami-cel, is to be filed next year for Mage-A4-positive synovial sarcoma and myxoid/round cell liposarcoma based on [data presented at Asco](#).

A separate autologous TCR, the NY-ESO-1-directed lete-cel, is the subject of a deal with Glaxosmithkline that had recently seen the latter [distance itself somewhat from Adaptimmune's sister company Immunocore](#). Maybe fear that Glaxo was mulling an Adaptimmune bid of its own persuaded Roche to lock in the assets it was interested in.

Still, despite its autologous focus, Adaptimmune has quietly been developing off-the-shelf therapies too. In 2015, for instance, it struck a deal with Universal Cells to develop allogeneic T-cell therapies; three years later Universal Cells was bought by Astellas, which then signed a further alliance focused on stem cell-derived allogeneic Car-T and TCR therapies. Adaptimmune presented some of this work at last year's ASGCT meeting.

Roche must have seen something it liked in Adaptimmune's allogeneic work, with the added bonus that some cell therapies are now affordable.

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