

Immune Design, Led By Star Scientists, Raises \$18 Million To Build Vaccine Company

Luke Timmerman 6/23/08

Vaccines are coming back in a big way. Immune Design, a Seattle-based startup vaccine company, made that clear today when [it said it raised \\$18 million in an initial round of venture capital](#).

The names involved are some of the biggest in immunology. The founders include Nobel Laureate David Baltimore of Caltech, Steve Reed of Infectious Disease Research Institute in Seattle, and Larry Corey of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, an expert in efforts to develop HIV vaccines. The company is backed by Alta Partners, The Column Group, and Versant Ventures.

Reed, an immunologist who earned his biotech stripes as a co-founder of Seattle-based Corixa, will be the founding CEO. (He's also one of the inaugural Xconomists in Seattle.) Baltimore is an adviser to The Column Group. So is Richard Klausner, the former head of the National Cancer Institute and former leader of global health at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who is joining the company's board. Immune Design's board chairman is Ed Penhoet, a partner at Alta Partners and the former CEO of Chiron. Penhoet's earlier company, also a vaccine maker, was sold to Novartis in 2005 for \$5.1 billion.

The new company's goal is a lofty one. It wants to design vaccines that coax the immune system to mount more specific, effective responses to infectious diseases than those prompted by traditional vaccines. Immune Design plans to do that with improved adjuvants. The adjuvants—compounds that boost the immune response—will be aimed at what are known as dendritic cells, which present bits of signature material from a foreign invader, like a virus, to other immune system cells. That's sort of like waving a red cape in front of a bull, inciting immune cells to attack just the right targets, scientists say. Most vaccines now work by triggering a more generalized stimulation of the immune system, a less efficient approach, Immune Design says.

The company's release doesn't say specifically what disease it is tackling first, although it says it expects its first vaccine candidate to reach clinical trials within 12 months.

Clearly, the technology is following a business opportunity. The vaccine business, shunned as a backwater for cheap commodities as recently as five years ago, is suddenly booming. Vaccines generated \$16 billion in sales in 2007, according to Immune Design's press release. Merck's Gardasil, for a virus that causes cervical cancer, generated \$1.5 billion in sales in 2007, its first full year on the market.

While at Corixa, Reed worked on vaccine adjuvants that helped spur London-based GlaxoSmithKline to acquire the company for \$300 million in 2005. His new company is down the hall from our new Xconomy Seattle office on First Hill, so you can be sure I'll be poking my head in there soon to learn more and tell you about it.