BUSINESS BRIEFS

Ligand to Buy Metabasis

Ligand Pharmaceuticals has agreed to acquire the troubled biotechnology company Metabasis Therapeutics, the two companies have announced. At the close of the transaction, Metabasis stockholders will receive a cash payment of $3.2 million minus its estimated net liabilities; Metabasis currently estimates the closing payment at $1.8 million. In addition, its stockholders will receive cash payments as frequently as every 6 months from proceeds of the sale or partnering of any of the Metabasis drug development programs. In recent months, Metabasis, which is developing treatments for diabetes and hyperlipidemia, had been delisted from the NASDAQ stock exchange, and its CEO had left for a position at Merck & Co.

Merck Begins Payment Disclosures

Merck & Co. paid physicians and medical professionals $3.7 million in 2009's third quarter, according to the company's Web site. Merck's total third- quarter payments are a sixth of those of its rival, Eli Lilly & Co.; the difference may have been due in part to the summer vacation season. But there might be other reasons. The physician receiving the top payment from Merck, for example, took in $22,600, far below the $70,000 received by Lilly's highest paid speaker. Merck's average payment per program was $1,548 and the maximum number of programs for any one speaker was 11. Lilly's speakers racked up far more speaking engagements; its top earners gave more than 40 lectures.

Sanofi, Wellstat Ink Pact

Sanofi-Aventis has signed a licensing deal for global rights to a first-in-class oral insulin sensitizer, PN2034, for treatment of type 2 diabetes. PN2034 restores responsiveness to insulin and enhances insulin action in the liver, according to Sanofi and its licensor, Wellstat Therapeutics. The molecule works through an undisclosed target distinct from that of best-selling insulin sensitizers already on the market, such as GlaxoSmithKline's Avandia (rosiglitazone) and Takeda's Actos (pioglitazone). "PN2034 has the potential to be used across the entire spectrum of [diabetes] patients," Michael Bamat, Wellstat's vice president for research and development, said in an interview. Sanofi will pay an undisclosed up front fee to Wellstat. The total valueof the deal could reach as high as $350 million.

Saxagliptin Okayed in Europe

Bristol Myers-Squibb and AstraZeneca's dipeptidyl peptidase-4 inhibitor Onglyza (saxagliptin) is set to launch in Europe in early 2010 after being officially cleared for treatment of type 2 diabetes. A once-daily 5-mg dose of the oral drug was cleared by the European Commission as an add-on therapy with the common diabetes treatments metformin, sulfonylureas, and thiazolidinediones, the companies announced last month. An "add-on" indication in Europe contrasts with the wider label in the United States, where Onglyza can be used solo. The Food and Drug Administration approved the product in late July as an adjunct to diet and exercise for improving glycemic control in adults with type 2 diabetes.

Myriad Finds IND Candidate

Myriad Pharmaceuticals Inc. has identified an investigational drug candidate targeting a novel molecular target, the protein kinase IKK epsilon. Inhibitors of IKK epsilon are expected to have significant potential for the treatment of obesity, diabetes, and associated diseases. Myriad's IND candidate, MPI-0485520, is a selective and potent inhibitor of IKK epsilon, with both in vitro and in vivo biological activity. "MPI-0485520 represents a potentially very large commercial opportunity for Myriad Pharmaceuticals," said Myriad president and CEO Adrian N. Hobden, Ph.D.

—From staff reports

Reporters and editors from Elsevier's "The Pink Sheet" contributed to this column.

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