

SELEXYS PHARMACEUTICALS

Humble start at Moore gas station launches career

Selexys Pharmaceuticals president and CEO Scott Rollins reflected on the lessons learned in the wake of the richest transaction in the history of Oklahoma biosciences – the recent \$665 million sale of Selexys to industry giant Novartis Pharmaceuticals.

“My first job was to clean the bathrooms and sweep the floors, so I did that,” Rollins said from his office on the fifth floor of the 840 building in the University of Oklahoma Research Park.

Oh, you thought Rollins was reflecting upon lessons learned from leading a life sciences company through the challenges of raising capital and taking a drug through a Phase 2 clinical trial. Selexys developed a therapeutic called SelG1 that treats painful crisis in sickle cell disease.

Rollins was actually telling me about his days as a teenager working at his dad’s gas station, Rollins Kerr McGee, in Moore, Oklahoma. That humble experience began the upward trajectory of his spectacular career as scientist and entrepreneur.

“At Rollins Kerr McGee, you graduated to pumping gas, oil changes and fixing tires,” he said. “I worked from the time I was 12 all the way into college, off and on, working for my dad, Windle Rollins.”

Rollins’ career journey included stops the University of Oklahoma, where he earned a Ph.D. in immunology and microbiology. As a graduate student at the OU Health Sciences Center, he also conducted research at the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation (OMRF).

“I performed research in the cardiovascular program at the OMRF,” he said. “That’s where I discovered the technology that led to the formation of Alexion Pharmaceuticals in 1992.”

After earning his Ph.D. at OU, Rollins began a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University. He eventually left Yale to co-found Alexion in New Haven, Connecticut.

Alexion Pharmaceuticals developed a drug that Rollins and Tetherex COO Russell Rother discovered called Soliris that treats a rare blood disease, and is based on the OMRF technology. Today, Alexion is a \$27 billion public company.

Rollins left Alexion in 2008 to accept the CEO position with Selexys and return to his native Oklahoma. Selexys was working to advance ground-breaking technology developed by OU and OMRF researcher Dr. Rodger McEver.

Selexys’s early development was supported by funding from the state appropriated Oklahoma Seed Capital Fund and private investors.



“Both OCAST and i2E put money into Selexys when there was very little other investment,” Rollins said. “It was critical to have that kind of solid backing such that other local investors were willing to come in. We were able to go out and raise \$10 million locally from high net-worth individuals.”

Novartis, MPM Capital and a group of private investors led fellow Oklahoman and OU graduate by Dr. Philip Jones provided the funding to Selexys for the Phase 2 trial of SelG1 in 200 patients nationwide, in exchange for the right to purchase the company if the trial was successful.

Of course, it was.

“I think it’s very important that we developed a drug for sickle cell disease here in Oklahoma with native Oklahomans on the management and investment team,” Rollins said. “Selexys is an Oklahoma success story, and the drug will be something for many years to come that Oklahomans can be proud of.”

The Selexys success demonstrates the value of investing state dollars in Oklahoma-based science and technology, said C. Michael Carolina, OCAST executive director.

“The substantial returns earned for the Seed Capital Fund through the sale of Selexys Pharmaceuticals validate the intent of the state’s early stage investment fund and provide us with future investment dollars,” Carolina said.

For Rollins and the team of seven at Selexys, the drug development work continues with a company called Tetherex, which was spun out of Selexys before the Novartis acquisition.

“We have a second drug that is targeting the Selectin pathway, an inflammatory pathway,” Rollins said. “We are currently treating patients with Crohn’s disease.”

Tetherex is just the latest stop on Rollins’ career journey that began long ago at his father’s gas station.

“Working at Rollins Kerr McGee taught me a great deal about how to interact with people,” Rollins said. “It created the initial work ethic that carried me all the way through college and beyond.”

And that’s a reflection on the lessons learned.

[See the story in the 1-11-17 Oklahoman](#)

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