



Centre for Drug Research and Development team: (left to right) Michel Roberge, Robert Hancock, Natalie Dakers, Pieter Cullis and David Dolphin

## UBC initiative to link biotech research with private enterprise opportunities

Centre for Drug Research and Development focused on reversing the drop in the number of biotech companies being launched in B.C.

Glenn Drexhage

**A** new centre at the University of British Columbia aims to bridge the gap between research and real-life prospects, with an accomplished biotech executive and local figurehead spearheading the effort.

Natalie Dakers became the Centre for Drug Research and Development's CEO in December.

"The concept behind the centre was really to leverage the world-class science that was going on in British Columbia," Dakers said.

Yet this top-notch community has faced some challenges in recent times. For example, Dakers highlighted the rapid growth that defined B.C.'s biotech sector between 1991 and 2001, when about 60 new biotech companies launched in B.C.

"And if you look at what's happened since then, we've really started to see a decline in the number of companies that have been created," she said.

Part of the challenge is that investors, such as venture capitalists, are now looking to back later-stage firms, but the concepts and companies emerging from university settings are inspired by academic research and saddled with early-stage status.

The new centre, then, aims to narrow this "commercialization gap." And that involves

building an infrastructure around the different stages of drug development to advance compounds or technologies to the point where they better meet investor criteria.

Other key figures in the centre's emergence include Pieter Cullis, a UBC professor and co-founder of Inex Pharmaceuticals Corp.; David Dolphin, a QLT Inc. vice-president and acting vice-president of research at UBC; and Robert Hancock, a co-founder of Inimex Pharmaceuticals Inc. and a UBC professor.

The centre, which aims to involve universities and teaching hospitals across the province, will feature five divisions to mimic the drug-development process: target validation, drug screening, drug design and synthesis, drug delivery and drug evaluation.

"We're going to train personnel in drug development – that'll be another objective of the centre," Dakers added.

The site will be split into two divisions. The Centre for Drug Research will focus on academic research, while the enterprise's commercial side is dubbed Drug Development Inc.

"The whole point is to create value with early-stage technologies such that we can better meet the criteria of the investment opportunity," Dakers said.

"I think it's a great idea," said Hector MacKay-Dunn, a senior partner at Farris, Vaughan, Wills & Murphy LLP who specializes in biotech deals.

MacKay-Dunn said the centre was a good initiative to address venture capitalist perceptions that various drug candidates haven't been developed enough before coming out of universities.

"The fact is perception is reality. And that's why I say it is one initiative that can help. There are other initiatives, including providing incentives for more early-stage capital for high-risk investment." MacKay-Dunn also lauded the choice of Dakers as the centre's leader.

Dakers previously had served as the president and CEO at Vancouver's Neuromed Technologies Inc., which named a new head last July.

Previous to those roles she was chief operating officer, and during her tenure at Neuromed she helped raise close to US\$50 million in venture capital. Today Dakers sits on the boards of organizations such as Genome BC, the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research and BC Biotech.

Before co-founding Neuromed, she was involved in life science technology transfer at UBC's university industry liaison office.

"She's got a unique combination of experience," MacKay-Dunn said. "She's sat on both sides of the table."

Her current tasks include fundraising and hiring. The centre is seeking to raise tens of millions of dollars for funding over 10 years. Dakers also said there could be about five to 10 hires this year, and foresees between 50 and 60 staffers at the centre within three years.

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**– Natalie Dakers, Centre for Drug Research and Development CEO**