Interviews From...

Sandeep Gupta
President & CEO, Asana BioSciences

With the rapid growth of the antibody drug conjugate market, more and more companies are being attracted to this field. Most excitingly, new ventures are fuelling new innovation.

Wanting to keep up with the latest developments, we took some time to talk to Sandeep Gupta, the Co-Founder, President and CEO of Asana BioSciences, a newly established player in the antibody drug conjugate field, at World ADC San Diego 2014.

Katie: Firstly, thank you for taking some time with us today. Sandeep, just to start, what is your background and that of Asana?

Sandeep: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Sandeep Gupta, and I am Co-Founder, President & Chief Executive Officer at Asana BioSciences, based out of Bridgewater, New Jersey. Prior to Asana, I was the Senior Vice-President of Discovery and Early Development at Endo Pharmaceuticals, and I also spent a decade at Forest Laboratories as Head of Drug Discovery and Pharmacology. I have played a key role in the development of several block buster drugs during my tenure at Endo and Forest. Before my industrial career, I held academic positions at the University of Pennsylvania and Boston University Schools of Medicine. As part of my career in pharmaceutical R&D, I have played a very active role in developing the Virtual Drug Discovery Research model, and I executed several successful Discovery and Development collaborations across the globe.

By way of background for Asana, very briefly, we are a spin-out from Endo Pharmaceuticals. Asana BioSciences became a separate, independent entity in June of 2014. Asana is involved in discovery and development of novel therapeutics.

Katie: What is it that Asana is particularly focused on at the moment?

Sandeep: Our current portfolio represents what was started at Endo. We were really focused on small molecules in oncology, but we have some significant efforts on the biologics side and ADCs as well.

Back in 2009, at Endo we realized that going forward, antibody drug conjugates were a key part of the future for oncology. Rather than sticking with

naked antibodies and trying to capitalize on their activity, we realized ADCs gave you more bang for your buck i.e. efficacy. Since then, we have been developing ADC programs.

We have a collaboration with Mersana Therapeutics, based out of Cambridge Massachusetts, and we also have our own linker program and cytotoxic payload program, which we are trying to develop ourselves.

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Katie: Great, so now that you're investing more focus on the ADC field, what do you think is the most exciting area of development that's currently out there?

Sandeep: Certainly, it has been exciting to see the ADC field expand from its origins with hematological cancers, to now include applications for solid tumors with the approval of Kadcyla. The variety of linker chemistry and warhead drugs available for ADCs has also seen considerable growth in recent years. I am particularly excited about the platforms that have potential to overcome challenges of resistance development in cancer; which efficiently and safely deliver more cytotoxic molecules per antibody and have efficacy against difficult to treat cancers. I'm very excited about the possibility of having a DAR of more than three or four.

We are actually achieving a DAR of 15, working with Mersana Therapeutics and using their Fleximer® technology. New cytotoxic payloads is also a very exciting area, there are a number of new entrants in the field.

What's ultimately important is the patient. The evaluation of ADCs as a first line therapy in metastatic cancer could have very meaningful survival benefits for the patients in the long run. That's what I'm really in it for.

"What's ultimately important is the patient."

Katie: And what part do you feel Asana is having in that long term vision at the moment?

Sandeep: We believe that Asana is having a significant impact in the field, as we advance ASN004 to become potentially the first ADC in the clinic utilizing the Fleximer linker technology and also with potential to be the "best in class" ADC. We initiated our collaboration with Mersana regarding Fleximer technology very early on and now other major Pharma companies have also joined hands with them; this validates our strategy and belief in the platform. Asana is positioned to be among the first companies to bring an ADC to the clinic with a DAR of 15. On top of that, our in-house novel linker platform technology is very versatile and is showing considerable promise in preclinical studies, and we expect to disclose some of the data from that program sometime next year.

Katie: It's really exciting to hear people have that long term vision; of the biologics, the linkers having a real-world impact on patients. Thinking a little bit more long term then, do you or Asana as a company, have any predictions for what the next 24 months might hold for the ADC community?

Sandeep: Of course, I would hope to see some of the ADCs now in the clinic, phase 2 setting, advance to regulatory approval. Within the next 24 months I expect that we will learn more about strategies to increase ADC selectivity – impacting efficacy and tolerability – by further optimization of antibodies, sites for conjugation, linkers, and cytotoxic payload drugs. As indicated earlier, results of ADC trials as a first line therapy in the metastatic settings are probably among the most anticipated events over the next couple of years.

As a drug developer who has been at it for the past two decades, these are some of the most exciting

prospects.

Katie: As Asana are attending World ADC San Diego, what do you hope that you're going to take back to the office?

Sandeep: As in previous years, this meeting is a great forum to interact with members of the ADC research community and gain new insights into this exciting and rapidly evolving field.

The most important thing that we are looking for is to understand the current state of ADCs and see how we can remove the kinks in our development programs and the issues we are going to face. We are a very new company and we have some experience and expertise but there are lots of development challenges, it's not an easy field. When you come to a meeting like this you interact with people who are absolutely involved, very hands on in seeing and resolving issues.

At this meeting we'll try to get a better understanding of some of our particular issues that we will be facing, from the regulatory perspective, from a manufacturing perspective, from toxicology perspective; we'll get a better insight and hopefully we can resolve our issues quickly and move our programs further.

Katie: Is there anything in particular that you're hoping to get out of the poster session, as Asana are presenting?

Sandeep: We want to showcase our program; show the power of DAR-15, as opposed to three or four; what kind of efficacy you can get and what kind of possibilities are out there with our ADC. We have shown data in multiple human cancer xenograft models, that our molecule is highly effective and it's very well tolerated.

"Asana is positioned to be among the first companies to bring an ADC to the clinic with a DAR of 15."

The caveat here is that we only have preclinical model data. But that's the good starting point for us and that's what we want people to walk away with – the impressive efficacy of our molecule.

Katie: Brilliant. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.