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Moderna joins the personalized cancer vaccine rush with third new venture

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[Moderna Therapeutics](#) is launching the third new personalized [cancer vaccine](#) venture in as many weeks, spinning out its messenger RNA tech into a separate entity dubbed Caperna.

This is Moderna's fourth venture spinout and its second cancer play, which will initially be helmed by Tal Zaks, the chief medical officer at Cambridge, MA-based Moderna and former head of oncology R&D for Sanofi ([\\$SNY](#)).

Moderna is banking on its manufacturing expertise to quickly whip up small batches of a personalized cancer vaccine designed to target the neoepitopes found on the unique antigens created by a tumor. And it's the new, new thing in oncology, which has long been one of the hottest fields in biotech.



Moderna CMO Tal Zaks

Tumor neoantigens are also the target of Gritstone Oncology, a startup led by ex-Clovis scientist Andrew Allen, which just announced a [\\$102 million startup round](#). That startup swiftly followed the launch of Third Rock's Neon Therapeutics with a \$55 million A round. And biotech billionaire Patrick Soon-Shiong just spent \$50 million to buy control of Precision Biologics, which is also working on neoepitopes.

Cancer vaccines have been around for years, but either failed commercially or frequently came up well short of the kind of efficacy needed to gain an approval. Aduro ([\\$ADRO](#)) and Celldex ([\\$CLDX](#)), though, have seen encouraging responses for their therapeutic cancer vaccines, either as a solo treatment or in combination with others, and work on a variety of programs continues.

These new personalized cancer vaccine players, though, believe that they can do much, much better in terms of targeting individual tumors. And the burst of new company creation is likely to breed more new initiatives and deals, especially as they form new collaborations around the checkpoint inhibitors for PD-1 and PD-L1 that are now entering the market.

In Moderna's case, the spinout comes after three years of some remarkable venture rounds and collaborations which have generated about a billion dollars in support for its work. But while Moderna has been busily whipping up new companies and generating dozens of preclinical programs, confidently touting its ability in mRNA to target a slew of targets, not a single program has yet entered the clinic. And Moderna's chief scientist, Joseph Bolen, also quietly resigned recently, [as reported by FierceBiotech](#).

Nicholas Valiante, the former Global Head of Immunology & Immunotherapy Research at Novartis ([\\$NVS](#)), will serve as VP and head of personalized vaccine sciences.

"With such a potent vaccine platform and a manufacturing process that lends itself directly to rapid production of patient-specific therapies, we believe Moderna's mRNA approach will offer distinct advantages in the development of new cancer therapies," said Zaks in a statement. "We expect our ability to specifically activate and direct the immune system will synergize with checkpoint inhibitor therapies like PD-1 antibodies."

- here's the [release](#)

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[R&D exec Tal Zaks leaps from flagging Sanofi to fast-growing Moderna](#)

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