

Ezra Pharmaceutical Selected for Funding in BR Venture Challenge Competition

(04/15/2010) Ezra Pharmaceutical, a startup company developing the first preventative therapy for diabetes-related blindness, shared second prize in Cornell University's BR Venture Challenge Competition. The competition is sponsored by BR Ventures, a student-run venture capital fund at Cornell University's Johnson School of Graduate Management. Presenting for Ezra were founder Daniel Knecht and Chief Scientist Nathan O'Connor.

Diabetes-related blindness, also known as diabetic retinopathy (DR), is the leading cause of adult blindness in the United States and the developed world. Over 90 percent of those afflicted with type-I (i.e. juvenile) diabetes typically develop DR, while 50 percent of type-II (adult-onset) diabetics also develop the condition. According to the American Diabetes Association, 12,000-24,000 Americans are diagnosed with DR each year. Despite the significant need for preventative treatment of this debilitating disease, no effective preventative therapeutic has been developed to date.

Ezra Pharmaceutical's therapeutic platform is based on the breakthrough research of Dr. Randi Silver at Weill-Cornell Medical College, a foremost expert in studying the role of mast cells in retinopathic pathophysiology. More commonly known as "allergy cells," mast cells have recently been found to mediate inflammation and immunity throughout the body. In DR, mast cells migrate to the retina and initiate a pro-fibrotic cascade by releasing renin, histamines, proteases and other pro-inflammatory compounds that result in leaky blood vessels as well as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), a substance that is directly implicated in neovascularization and retinal damage. Ezra Pharmaceutical has developed proprietary technology for formulating and administering agents known as mast cell stabilizers, which can be used to halt the progression of DR.