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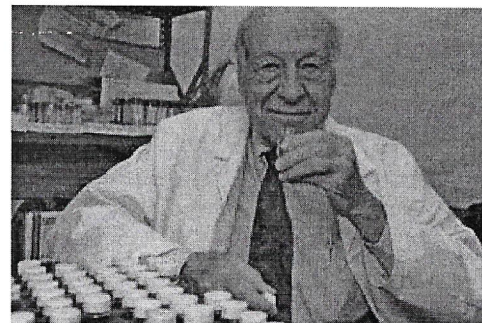
## Inova's next accelerator startup attacks 'hidden handicap': taste and smell loss

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D.C.-based Cyrano Therapeutics is developing a treatment for patients with a chronic loss of smell and taste, and it's infused with new life thanks to Inova Health System's accelerator.

The 4-year-old company, the fourth named to the Inova Personalized Health Accelerator, can now pursue clinical trials with its financial backing, as it eyes Food and Drug Administration approval within the next two to three years for its novel nasal spray, founder Dr. Robert Henkin told me.



JOANNE S. LAWTON

Cyrano Therapeutics founder Dr. Robert Henkin has run the Taste and Smell Clinic in D.C. for 40 years.

And that support is “critically important,” he said, because while blindness and deafness are clearly defined, olfactory impairment — a condition affecting the loss of smell and an associated loss of taste following virus, allergy, head injury, anesthesia and other events — is a “hidden handicap” that affects 14 million Americans.

“Food is a language, and if it’s gone — you can’t smell or taste — you’ve lost your ability to understand what’s happening in life, and your personal approach to eating and social activities is just limited,” he said. “We are the first company really involved with addressing this major issue. It’s an unmet medical need that we want to take care of.”

The company evolved from Henkin’s research at National Institutes of Health, which led him to pioneering the area in practice. He opened the Taste and Smell Clinic in Washington more than 40 years ago and, in 2014, created the startup and embarked on the trail to commercializing its product. The nasal spray demonstrated efficacy in restoring smell function in pilot studies, using an approved molecule called theophylline. It’s repurposed for an inter-nasal method of delivery, rather than a systemic one, because it works faster with fewer side effects, Henkin said. Now, he said, fulfilling FDA requirements will be vital to get it to patients.

But beyond that coveted stamp of approval, Cyrano’s founder wants to educate physicians across the country about the underlying cause of smell and taste dysfunction — that stem cells in these patients need to be stimulated.

“We’re going to deal with this and hopefully put this on the map as a real medical issue in which there will be taste and smell clinics all over the United States, in every medical school, so that patients all over the world can be evaluated and treated,” he said, adding that Inova’s ENT program will serve as one major site for this training.

Cyrano Therapeutics, funded to date with \$500,000 in investments and Henkin’s personal investment, needs about \$5 million to initiate clinical trials and complete other FDA-required studies, also aiming for an accelerated pathway to market. Inova — whose accelerator companies receive \$75,000 in exchange for up to 10 percent equity — has put in a small chunk to get the ball rolling, and is seeking a partner to get the necessary funding.

Inova chose to back the company for a few reasons, according to a spokeswoman. The Falls Church-based health system’s Parkinson’s practice has patients who have lost their senses of smell and taste — as well as a doctor who’s already been sending patients to Cyrano to participate in studies. With that, the drug could benefit patients at a reasonable cost. And, it has strong patent protection.

“This nasal spray will provide physicians with an effective tool to improve patients’ quality of life without causing significant limitations for patients,” said IPHA Director Mike Thomas in a statement.

Cyrano joins HeMemics Biotechnologies, Kinometrix and CoverMyTest in the accelerator, which launched at the end of last year as part of the Inova Center for Personalized Health in Merrifield. That was led by Todd Stottlemeyer until he left the health system last month. Amid other leadership changes at Inova, Patrick Walters, former CEO of Inova Loudoun Hospital, is serving as interim head of its personalized health center.

**Sara Gilgore**  
Staff Reporter  
*Washington Business Journal*

