



[Promise of new non-addictive painkillers to address opiate crisis highlighted in panel](#)

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([BBJ](#)) A panel held last week by a Cambridge firm working to develop non-addictive painkillers was intended to let people know that in addition to policy-based methods to address the opiate addiction crisis now gripping the country, there's also a technological one.

[Hydra Biosciences](#), a 15-year-old, venture-backed biotech, hosted an event on Oct. 22 at the [Liberty Hotel](#) in Boston called "PAIN: a conversation." The panel featured local experts including [Cheryl Bartlett](#), former commissioner of the state's department of public health, as well as [Russell Herndon](#), CEO and president of Hydra. About 100 people were in attendance. In an interview, Herndon says there's a lot of activity at the state and federal level to address the opioid dependency, but most of it is from a policy perspective.

"We applaud all the activity as far as training.. but one of the things we thought was missing was, what about alternatives to opioids?" said Herndon. "Part of the discussion needs to involve innovation." He said Hydra has been in the field of drugs that regulate so-called ion channels for years, but taking a different approach from Zalicus, a former Cambridge biotech which worked for years to develop non-addictive painkillers but failed to ever get a drug approved. Hydra's approach is also different from attempts to make opiates less addictive by making them "abuse deterrent," which usually means formulations that are harder to crush up and snort.

Hydra's drugs seek to modulate proteins which are responsible for causing painful reactions called transient receptor potential ion channels. Herndon says of that field that "there is a lot of interest, but I would say we're the most advanced." The company's first drug is now in early-stage human trials in Canada in healthy volunteers to assess safety, but will be tested early next year in patients with painful diabetic neuropathy and allergic asthma.

Hydra's potential drugs would be an important advancement for painkillers in that they do not block proteins in the brain, rather it works at the nerves outside the brain, and would therefore not be addictive.

The company now has 24 employees, more than three-quarters of which are scientists. Its venture backers include Advanced Technology Ventures, Lilly Ventures, Polaris Venture Partners, New Enterprise Associates, MedImmune Ventures, BioVentures, and Abingworth.



An event last week called “Pain: a conversation” featured Russell Herndon, CEO of Hydra Biosciences; David Clapham, Hydra Biosciences founder; Cheryl Bartlett, executive director of the Cape Cod Regional Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative; Nathaniel Katz, founder and president of Analgesic Solutions; and Cindy Steinberg, national director of Policy and Advocacy for the U.S. Pain Foundation.

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