

# SILICON VALLEY BUSINESS JOURNAL

## How an entrepreneur with UC technology is on the trail toward the 'undruggable'

By Ron Leuty  
June 26th, 2019

Roping in \$67 million from a posse of investors and corralling technology from the University of California, Berkeley, startup Frontier Medicines Corp. is hitting the trail to drug "undruggable" cancer targets.

The South San Francisco company's Series A round, disclosed Tuesday, comes from a mix of tech, biotech and crossover investors led by [Deerfield Management](#), Droia Oncology Ventures and [MPM Capital](#). Data Collective's DCVC Bio affiliate, [RA Capital Management](#) and other investors also participated.



The \$67 million is a good-sized bounty for a biotech startup, but investors are betting that Frontier cofounder and CEO [Chris Varma](#), who has built companies at MPM, Third Rock Ventures and Flagship Ventures, can capture cancer and other diseases by targeting drifting proteins.

Frontier's key is so-called "chemoproteomics" technology developed through the labs of [Daniel Nomura](#) and [Roberto Zoncu](#) at UC Berkeley. Nomura created a database of protein hotspots that can tell Frontier where it can apply a drug. Frontier then built out chemical libraries to screen against those targets. Instead of using chemoproteomic's chemical probes to interrogate and understand protein function, Frontier is using the technology to identify where to put a drug on a particular protein.



Of 20,000 human proteins, about 10 percent are considered targets for drugs. The vast majority of proteins, including many important drivers of cancer, have been shape-shifters, not giving drugs anything to rope. But the technology provides some definition to those proteins to identify hotspots and then develop drugs to ride those sites.

Drawing out and mapping where to drug targets on protein molecules is one challenge; finding drugs against those targets is another. "We do both," Varma said.

Classically, drug companies have only been able to inhibit proteins, but the new targets can be inhibited or degraded, depending on whether the protein also serves useful functions.

Frontier isn't disclosing its initial targets or its timeline to take its first drug into clinical trials in humans, Varma said. But the Series A cash roundup provides it with an "appropriate amount" of capital. Frontier has 10 employees at the Cove at Oyster Point complex in South San Francisco, but it plans to grow to 22 by the end of the year, said Varma, who cofounded Blueprint Medicines, Vision Medicines and Warp Drive Bio while at MPM and Third Rock and ran a portfolio company at Flagship. The company is starting against cancer, but Varma said Frontier's chemoproteomics approach can deputize drugs against other diseases.

At the same time, Varma said, Frontier plans to develop partnerships with pharmaceutical companies. Just last week, [Gilead Sciences](#) Inc. (NASDAQ: GILD) of Foster City paid \$45 million upfront in a potential \$2.3 billion deal to tap the protein-degradation work of [Nurix Inc.](#) of San Francisco to attack cancer.

"What compelled our investors was that we could do something the industry has wanted to do for 100 years or more," Varma said. "Once you believe that, you can have confidence that we can accomplish something quite profound."