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Sanofi R&D Head’s Words Of Wisdom For Biotechs

08 May 2025 • By [Kevin Grogan](#)

Houman Ashrafian tells delegates at Swiss Biotech Day that ‘literally only two things matter in our industry – target credentialing and differentiated pharmacology. The rest is execution.’



Houman Ashrafian • Source: Sanofi

Sanofi R&D chief Houman Ashrafian is very sympathetic to the plight of cash-strapped biotechs but has implored companies not to skimp financially on the design and development of their clinical programs.

Speaking to delegates at the Swiss Biotech Day event in Basel earlier this week, Ashrafian said that his take-home message was “don’t squeeze clinical development. Doing the wrong trial with your asset will kill it very quickly.” He added that “we’ve got multiple examples [where] if the biotechs had spent \$3m-\$4m more, they’d have had transformative results. They were just underpowered, control-inefficient.”

Adding more patients to a Phase I trial invariably extends the time the study will take to read out and increases the cost. However, as Ashrafian pointed out, “it’s a false economy to finish six months earlier and have a failed trial. With two months more and 5-10 more patients, maybe it would have been a different story.”

If you don’t have profound human targeting early in your Phase I, it is a world of pain

Houman Ashrafian, Sanofi R&D chief

Going further, he claimed: “Literally only two things that matter in our industry – target credentialing and differentiated pharmacology. The rest is execution.” Ashrafian, who joined Sanofi [in September 2023](#) from SV Health Investors where he co-founded nine biotechs, including Alchemab Therapeutics, Enara Bio and Sitryx, insisted that “I love biotech [and] we get excited by a pathway but when we get into humans, we’re a bit sloppy. If you don’t have profound human targeting early in your Phase I, it is a world of pain.”

It is also going to be painful journey if the biotech cannot offer something genuinely novel. In China, he said, there were over 50 IL-17 inhibitors – the mechanism of action in inflammatory blockbusters such as Novartis’ Cosentyx (secukinumab) and Eli Lilly’s Taltz (ixekizumab) – and the country is developing “a tsunami of new molecules” on top of that “which is hugely welcome,” so to compete, European and US biotechs need to have a razor-sharp focus on differentiating pharmacology.

While “biotech produces molecules at a significant discount for big pharma, no question, and is much more efficient,” Ashrafian said, early clinical stage companies “would benefit from our advice and we give that advice humbly. We certainly don’t know everything [but] we know how to make sure you do the right CMC, we know a little bit about how to ensure you design the right trials, maybe a bit conservatively, to get through regulators. We have armies of regulatory people who can support these companies.”

New Sanofi Capital Fund To Help Biotechs

It is not just advice that Sanofi could come up with. While the firm’s corporate venture arm has “done a lovely job and produced a number of companies,” Ashrafian has been instrumental in setting up an additional capital fund, which involves making “a \$20m simple equity investment to come in alongside existing investors and support the clinical development of those companies.”

He told the [Swiss Biotech Day](#) audience that biotechs “get molecules through Phase I beautifully but actually the trial that determines the exit or the next financing round is often not well done in my experience, and that included me, by the way. That \$20m might help you.”

Ashrafian predicted that “by 2030, many of the clinical trials that we run will be designed by artificial intelligence,” improving probability of success and predicting Phase III results from Phase II. “All of that’s happening now, it’s not a mystery” and the data will not “be behind the doors of some of the big tech companies” but available publicly for biotechs to tap into, helping to speed up their trials and reducing the risk of failure. “This will be something investors get interested in over the next five years,” he said.

Ashrafian was optimistic about the future prospects for biotechs, despite talk of tariffs leading to a possible slowdown in dealmaking. “It’s not true. I was with all the heads of R&D a couple of weeks ago, and there has never been more interest. The [deals are changing shape](#), they look different, they’re going early. My number one message is pharma’s been never more hungry.”

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