

VRF, what it is, who we are.

WHA: May we start with a short introduction to your company?

DA: The VR Foundation is a non-profit organization aimed squarely at vitiligo, the neglected disease. Our mission is to expedite the end of suffering of millions of people worldwide, who are affected by this annoying skin condition. Our involvement in vitiligo started about 5 years ago for familial reasons, but we formalized our charitable and research activities under one roof just recently. Today we care, we educate, we advance knowledge.



WHA: What best describes your approach?

DA: We define our approach as applying biotechnology tools to gain a deep understanding of the pathophysiology of the disease and identifying compounds to produce fully regulated, FDA approved drugs to combat vitiligo.

While we are not alone at aiming at vitiligo, I think we are unique in the interdisciplinary approach that we have. Most researchers are focused on genetics, metabolics, inflammation, oxidative stress and other hypotheses, a range of theories that readily come to mind when you think “vitiligo.” We aim at robust understanding of the disease to build a Vitiligo Map, in order to close gaps in its knowledge, identify targets regardless of their perceived ‘druggability’, to create a novel therapy.

WHA: It does sound like a long-term project. What are your short-term goals?

DA: The drug development business is a long-haul venture, indeed. Because we are a donor-supported organization, we do not have a luxury of the behemoth R&D budgets of the Big Pharma. And because we are much attuned to risk of running into a complex, multi-year and multi-million dollar study in vitiligo, we also try to find an existing treatment that’s already been used in humans to some degree of effect, and then understand, eliminate some of the side effects and enhance the positive effect.

WHA: Currently, do alternative treatments exist for this skin condition? Is there a market demand for this therapy?

DA: Not really. The mainstream treatment for vitiligo is either psoralen-based creams or steroids in combination with UV light exposure or a surgery. Unfortunately, they do not always produce satisfactory long-term results. Some naturopathic products reportedly produce good results in some patients, but we have not been able to verify these claims. And yes, there is an estimated \$12 billion market for vitiligo products, grossly underserved.

WHA: What is in your pipeline, if that’s applicable to your current status at all?

DA: Right now, we do struggle with the size of our scientific pipeline, not because we don’t have enough leads but because we have too many open things to work on. This puts our CEO Yan Valle and Chief Scientific Director Dr. Igor Korobko into a ruthless application of decision-making and prioritization to make sure we are working on the highest priority things. That’s a good problem to have.

WHA: Do you have a team in place to accomplish your ambitious goals?

DA: Yes, and I am very happy with it. We do have a great depth on our both Advisory Board and Executive Management Team, including the General Counsel, one of the best in the US. These people know how to plan and execute, and that’s the backbone of a successful company.



WHA: Is there a central research hub or you outsource the R&D?

DA: We use a fairly virtual model, so we outsource to trusted researchers or partners from different countries a good portion of our work. We think we have the resources, both financial and management, to be able to make a considerable

progress in vitiligo treatment development. But I must tell you that one of the struggles for a small company is obviously how many things you can do at the same time.

WHA: Given your priorities for Vitiligo Map and existing treatments improvements, what are your plans for advancing the product to the market?

DA: Although it is far too early for marketing plans, we envision to market our products internationally, where vitiligo represents more significant problem to the people because of social stigma attached to it. Therefore, we think that it's important that we conduct clinical trials in those countries, which produce clinical data results acceptable for interpretation both by the national regulators and by the FDA.

WHA: Would you comment on your financial plans to take you to your goals?

DA: Knock on wood, I haven't had to worry about raising money for our research phase, but we will need additional donor financing for clinical trials. We have applied to the IRS for 501(c)3 status to be able to start fundraising later this year.

WHA: Is anybody else working on a similar concept?

DA: Nobody that we are aware of.

Dr. DMITRY AKSENOV, the Founder and President of the non-profit VR Foundation, Inc., is directing the recently formed management team and leveraging the experience of the Board of Directors.