COMBINATORX

more besides, to protect its carefully patented combinations. The company is, for instance, using timed-release formulations that make its two-part recipes difficult to mimic.

His arguments have certainly swayed some investors. "They've gone to great lengths to refine the timing of the combinations and the dosage," says William Hunter, chief executive of Angiotech Pharmaceuticals, a biotech firm in Vancouver, Canada. Last October, Angiotech agreed to pay CombinatoRx \$42 million — plus up to \$460 million in downstream milestone and royalty payments — for access to its database and the rights to develop active combinations for specific applications, such as preventing internal scarring after surgery.

Simple considerations of convenience may also play a big role, argues Ted Ashburn, head of business development at Dynogen Pharmaceuticals in Waltham, Massachusetts. "It is inherently easier for doctors to write, and for insurers to reimburse, one prescription versus two — and for patients to take a single tablet versus two."

One precedent suggests that CombinatoRx will be able to charge reasonable, if not exorbitant, rates for its pills. NitroMed, of Lexington, Massachusetts, makes BiDil, a congestive heart-failure drug targeted at African-Americans. Based on two off-patent components, BiDil costs up to \$11 per day — roughly double the cost of the generics.

That, the CombinatoRx crew hopes, is a harbinger of things to come. "I obviously have a personal, financial and emotional stake in the company," says Stockwell. "But if you really believe in the approach, then CombinatoRx should by rights become the largest and most successful pharmaceutical company in the history of the industry."

IN BRIEF

BIOCRYST BUOYED The US Food and Drug Administration last week agreed that potential flu drug peramivir can be fast-tracked through the approval process. Made by BioCryst Pharmaceuticals of Birmingham, Alabama, peramivir is an injectable drug that may be able to treat avian flu. News of its fast-track status sent BioCryst's share price soaring — it closed up 17.6%, at \$22.41, on the day of the announcement. The fast-track process means that fewer data have to be shown before the drug's approval for use in humans. BioCryst's shares have more than doubled in value since the start of October, boosted not only by peramivir but also by the launch of an anticancer drug trial and a licensing deal with Roche (see *Nature* 438, 737; 2005).

CHIPPING AWAY Just one day after Intel disappointed Wall Street with fourth-quarter results that were weaker than expected, its chief competitor revealed record sales for the same period. On 18 January, Advanced Micro Devices of Sunnyvale, California, the second-largest manufacturer of the chips that run personal computers, announced sales of \$1.84 billion for the fourth quarter, up 45% on the previous year. This suggests that despite being the world's leading semiconductor maker, Intel may be losing more market share to its arch-rival than it has acknowledged.

Pfizer STRUGGLES Hounded by generic competition, Pfizer, the world's largest drug-maker, reported lacklustre results for the fourth quarter of 2005. At \$2.73 billion, net income was down 3.3% on the previous year. Fourth-quarter revenues fell 8.9% from 2004, to \$13.59 billion. In a statement, Henry McKinnell, Pfizer's chief executive, called 2005 "one of the most difficult years in memory". But the latest results weren't as bad as investors had feared, and the firm's share price closed up 4% at \$24.97 on 19 January, the day the results were announced.

MARKET WATCH

SOURCE: ECO

Stocks in companies with interests in alternative energy sources breezed into the new year, with investors particularly excited by the prospects for solar power.

The WilderHill Clean Energy Index (ECO on the American Stock Exchange) moved forward on the back of news about successful share offerings in a couple of solar-panel companies. The sector is also benefiting from a general sense that the uncertainty about oil and gas supplies that dogged major nations in 2005 won't dissipate any time soon — leaving people more positive about energy sources that were once considered to be on the fringe.

"Solar stocks are taking off," says Robert Wilder, whose company, WilderShares in Encinitas, California, maintains the ECO index. An initial public offering (IPO) for SunPower, a solar-panel maker spun off by California-based Cypress

Semiconductor in November, raised \$139 million. Then last month, an IPO for China's Suntech Power netted \$455 million — not bad at a time when many young companies are struggling to get initial public offerings off the ground. "Solar-panel companies are growing at 30–40% each year, and they are typically selling everything they can produce," Wilder says.

But it's not all rosy for alternative-energy suppliers. Companies working with hydrogen or fuel cells "continue to disappoint", Wilder says. Many of the smaller ones, he adds, are now "running out of money".

This week, WilderHill and London-based New Energy Finance will launch a new market index tracking more non-US companies than ECO, reflecting the strength of demand for energy from renewable sources in Europe and Asia. ■

Colin Macilwain