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Philly VCs back Jersey drug seller EKR

EKR Therapeutics Inc., a Cedar Knolls, N.J. firm that markets drugs too small to make a difference to the biggest pharmaceutical companies, has picked up \$50 million in equity from new investors LLR Partners, Philadelphia, and MPM Capital, Boston, plus previous investors NewSpring Capital, Radnor; a management-led group; and LLR sister funds Quaker BioVentures and the Garden State Life Sciences Venture Fund.

GE Healthcare Financial Services added \$95 million in senior debt financing.

EKR will use the money to buy back drugs that were acquired by PDL Biopharma, Redwood City, Calif., from EKR predecessor ESP Pharma, Edison, N.J., in March 2005, for \$500 million, said EKR spokesman Stuart Levine.

Levine credited Quaker BioVentures partner Adele Oliva as a key Philadelphia connection. Oliva, a onetime CoreStates Bank business lender, spent a decade at Apax Partners, where she helped ESP buy hypertension drug Cardene I.V. from Wyeth Labs in 2002.

ESP executives including Howard Weisman, now EKR's CEO, helped boost sales from around \$5 million a year, to \$120 million last year, according to Levine. EKR said last month it was buying Cardene back for \$85 million.

"It was incredible to watch that team move the needle at Cardene," said Oliva. "The team is clearly capable of managing a larger company."