

Life Sciences Group Of The Year: Wilson Sonsini

By Jessica Corso

Law360, New York (January 8, 2016, 10:05 PM ET) -- Silicon Valley heavyweight Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati was at the forefront of one of the largest IPOs in the history of the life sciences industry last year, guiding cancer treatment developer NantKwest Inc. to a \$207 million debut and placing the firm's life science practitioners squarely on Law360's Life Sciences Groups of the Year.



A team of Wilson Sonsini lawyers working across six different practice areas, including corporate attorneys leading the initiative and intellectual property attorneys ensuring NantKwest's patents were in order, came together to push the company to the public market in July. That level of collaboration is not unusual, according to partner Douglas Carsten, for a firm that is set up to encourage cooperation among nearly 100 attorneys across nine offices.

"We've got the SWAT team approach that whatever a client who's in the life sciences space needs, we've got the ability and the team to put at the solution," Carsten said.

He pointed out that no one person leads the life sciences team at the Palo Alto, California-headquartered firm, with expertise spread across practices areas as broad as IP counseling, litigation, and mergers and acquisitions.

Carsten himself works as a litigation partner in the firm's San Diego office, from where he led two recent Federal Circuit victories that also helped propel Wilson Sonsini to the top of the pile.

In December 2014, Carsten and others at Wilson Sonsini won a unique victory on behalf of longstanding client Mylan Pharmaceuticals Inc. when the Federal Circuit upheld an oral settlement entered into between Mylan and Endo Pharmaceuticals Inc. That ruling was a major disappointment for Endo, which had won a ruling that Mylan had infringed its migraine drug Frova, but not before the oral agreement was entered into — an agreement the circuit said was enforceable.

More recently, Carsten and his team won another victory for Mylan when the Federal Circuit threw out a Pfizer Inc. patent for arthritis drug Celebrex, determining that the patent was an illegal reissue of one on which Pfizer had already run out the clock.

"There's a fair bit of nuance and experience that is required to properly litigate a Hatch-Waxman case," Carsten said of the firm's work on generic drug cases. "We've done it so much, we do it so much, that Mylan and other clients value our judgment."

The bulk of the firm's remaining clients aren't pharmaceutical giants like Mylan but instead consist of emerging companies like NantKwest that the firm helps nurture from basement startups to towering titans of the industry.

In fact, the current head of the patents and innovation counseling practice, Vern Norviel, first came to know the attorneys at Wilson Sonsini as a founder of Affymetrix, the biotech company that pioneered DNA chip technology.

"I found them to be extremely practical, not academic, not worrying about things you don't need to worry about," Norviel said of his interactions with Wilson Sonsini's attorneys, who often worked on the opposite side of the table from Affymetrix.

Norviel, now a 14-year veteran at the firm, said he couldn't be happier at Wilson Sonsini, where he continues to push budding companies forward by advising them on their patent portfolios. In the past year, his team has worked on the patent portfolio for the NantKwest deal as well as advising Pharmacyclics Inc. in its \$21 billion sale to AbbVie Inc.

Helping drug developers and scientists turn their fledgling idea into a multimillion-dollar product is nothing novel for a firm that, as Norviel pointed out, coached Apple Inc. through its IPO and helped get Google Inc. off the ground.

"Three guys from Stanford, just like all of my clients, they wander in my door and want to start a company," Norviel said. "It's the story of our lives."

--Additional reporting by Chelsea Naso, Jacob Batchelor and Kurt Orzeck. Editing by Catherine Sum.
