



Former Novartis executive Tsai to lead UK heart drug startup

John Tsai, previously Novartis' chief medical officer, has been named CEO of Forcefield Therapeutics, a new biotech working on a treatment for heart attacks.

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Forcefield Therapeutics CEO John Tsai Permission granted by John Tsai

Former top Novartis executive John Tsai has been named CEO of U.K. biotechnology startup Forcefield Therapeutics, one year after he left the Swiss drugmaker amid a corporate restructuring.

Launched last spring, Forcefield is backed by life sciences investor Syncona, where Tsai is an executive partner. The company is developing a treatment for acute heart attacks, building on the work of Mauro Giacca, a King's College London professor who identified cardioprotective proteins that could help prevent the loss of heart cells.

"There's no bigger healthcare problem than heart disease, the number one cause of death worldwide, which has gone decades without any real pharmacological innovation," wrote Tsai, who served as Novartis' chief medical officer, in a post on LinkedIn.

As CEO, Tsai will help Forcefield shepherd its lead drug candidate into clinical trials. The company, which was staked with about \$6 million from Syncona in April 2022, has so far conducted testing of its approach in mice. It also recently struck a deal with Freeline Therapeutics to license use of that company's adeno-associated

viral vector gene therapy technology for certain cardiac conditions.

Tsai isn't the first former Novartis executive to run the biotech startup. From Forcefield's launch through January 2023, the company was led by Richard Francis, formerly CEO of Novartis' generic drug division Sandoz.

Tsai was Novartis' chief medical officer for four years until he departed in May 2022 alongside then oncology chief Susanne Schaffert and Novartis' customer and technology unit head Robert Weltevreden. The pharma has reshuffled its organization, laid off staff and moved ahead with plans to separate out its Sandoz division in the year since then.