

# Bonus episode: It's this big, giant brouhaha of pharmaceutical companies

*The following is the script of C&EN's Ryan Cross and Megha Satyanarayana discussing the 2020 J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference in January. We have edited their conversation for length and clarity.*

**Ryan Cross:** Doo doo doo doo. Welcome to *Stereo Chemistry*.

[Laughter]

**Megha Satyanarayana:** Hi, Matt. This is Megha.

**Ryan:** I'm not Matt.

**Megha:** No, I was saying Matt because Matt is going to edit it.

**Ryan:** Oh. Hi, Matt.

**Megha:** Hi, Matt. I'm being kind. How is it that I'm the one who's being midwestern kind here?

**Ryan:** Boston does things to you.

**Megha:** I guess it does.

**Matt:** Hey, everyone. I am Matt Davenport, and welcome to another bonus episode of *Stereo Chemistry*. Our goal with these bonus episodes is to give you a little more access and insight to how we do our jobs here at C&EN by taking you behind the scenes with our reporters.

Today, you're going to hear from a couple of C&EN's best: Ryan Cross, our Boston biotech reporter who grew up in Indiana; and Megha Satyanarayana, who reports for both our business and science teams at C&EN. She's based in Dallas after living and working in Detroit for a while.

And both of them were just in San Francisco for the J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference. At the very end of the conference, they sat down together and talked about their takeaways from the meeting.

But we don't want to give away too much, because both Megha and Ryan are working on awesome stories that will include some stuff they learned while reporting in San Francisco. Still, if you listen carefully, you might get some clues about what they're working on.

So the goal of this bonus episode is to focus on the meeting itself. That is, what was special or different about JPM 2020? We'll start off by letting Megha and Ryan explain what JPM is.

**Megha:** So it's this big, giant brouhaha of pharmaceutical companies and biotech companies that all descend upon Union Square in San Francisco to basically make the deals and do the partnering that's going to get them through their next phases of drug development and getting to market.

**Ryan:** It's one of the industry's most important business conferences.

**Megha:** It is.

**Ryan:** So there, there aren't any poster sessions here, which is kind of sad.

**Megha:** I love poster sessions, but we're kind of nerdy that way.

**Ryan:** Lots of slide decks, though.

**Megha:** Lots of slide decks. And lots of spiral-bound presentations that are handed out. But what it's good for, for us as reporters, is it helps us kind of frame what are some of the trends and some of the ideas that we need to keep an eye on as we move through our year.

**Ryan:** All of the acquisitions that we hear about throughout the year, a lot of these things they start here this week at JPM.

**Megha:** Except that this year, there wasn't a lot of news about acquisitions.

**Ryan:** No. No. I would say the theme this year at JPM was really that it was kind of a dull year. There weren't any megamergers. There were no multibillion-dollar acquisitions. There were plenty of smaller deals, lots of start-ups raising capital. But, by and large, when you listen to people walking down the hallways and look on Twitter, it's a lot of people complaining about how boring it was this year.

**Megha:** Which is kind of interesting because one source that I talked to basically, he kind of shut me down really fast. He's like, "Oh, come on, already. It's January. This is where the deals start." And I think that the quote that he gave me was something along the lines of "JPM is not like a hard line in the sand that everybody has to make announcements at. It's actually the beginning of a lot of stuff that will be announced in Q3, Q4." That kind of thing.

**Ryan:** Mm-hmm.

**Megha:** So this person that I talked to said this is going to be a big year for two kind of key reasons. One, there's a ton of innovation going on in biotech, small- and midcap biotech. And secondly, pharma is sitting on a giant bucket of money.

So, you know, throughout the course of the year, all the deals that we thought we were going to hear about at the meeting, which seems to have been par for the course in the last several years, we're now going to hear later on.

So this is my first JPM. Ryan, what number is this for you?

**Ryan:** This is year 3 for me.

**Megha:** Goodness, you're an expert.

**Ryan:** Did you think it was . . . Well, this was your first JPM.

**Megha:** Yeah.

**Ryan:** What was your impression of it?

**Megha:** One of the things that I really got out of this meeting is the number of interesting ways, both biologically and chemically, that people are trying to go about drug development, whether it's a small molecule or a biologic. I mean, I talked to companies that are looking at altering the microbiome using phage. I talked to companies that are looking to attack disease using carbohydrate-based drugs, fat-based drugs. It's not all sort of small molecule, organic chemistry in the way that maybe we're used to.

And I think that that has to do with the fact that the diseases that are, the diseases that we're talking about these days that are of interest to a lot of companies are really, really hard to tackle. They're very person specific. This idea of personalized treatment, because one person's manifestation of disease may not be the same as another. And so what I gathered—from at least my conversations with people—is that there is a lot of honest-to-goodness creativity.

I think that for me, what's going to be the most interesting thing to come out of this year is potentially how the conversation is going to change around FDA, as well. It is an election year.

**Ryan:** You know, this came up in several of my interviews as well. And it always started with, "I don't want to get into politics, but . . ."

**Megha:** But we're going to get into politics.

**Ryan:** And then they get into politics. It's sort of a big unknown, sort of a big variable that's hanging over the field, right?

**Megha:** Mmm.

**Ryan:** We don't know if the election is going to impact biotech and pharma at all, but with all the talk of drug pricing, it does seem to be a factor.

**Megha:** One of the people that I talked to while I was here said that one of the things that we know we should all be paying attention to over the next year or so is how FDA is going to cope with the number of gene and cell therapy applications that they're going to get.

**Ryan:** Mmm. Right. You know, there are a couple, there are two cell therapy and two gene therapies approved in the US so far. And the FDA expects to start approving several more, several per year in 2025.

You know, actually I've thought about this a little bit. You know, back in the spring, I went to the cell and gene therapy meeting in Washington, DC, and there was this . . .

**Megha:** Was it during cherry blossom season?

**Ryan:** You know, I think it was over. Either way, I didn't have time to get over there, unfortunately. I was romping the halls of the gene therapy posters. And the FDA was there, and they were recruiting. They had flyers up on the job boards trying to recruit for these dozens of positions that they need to start evaluating these cell and gene therapy applications.

**Megha:** You know, this one source mentioned to me that he's really interested in seeing how FDA is going to respond to this imbalance that may happen, where all of a sudden you're getting a lot more

applications for gene therapies and for cell-based therapies, versus just good old-fashioned hardcore small-molecule inhibitors or small-molecule compounds.

**Matt:** So I'm going to step in and cut them off before they go too in depth and scoop themselves. But don't worry, they've got plenty more biotech news coming your way in C&EN. And we do have time for one last hot take from JPM.

**Megha:** So what was the most interesting thing you learned this week?

[Hums *Jeopardy* theme]

**Ryan:** Am I supposed to have an obvious answer for this?

**Megha:** No, not at all. We're going to change it to what is the most interesting thing we saw this week.

**Ryan:** Oh, well, I saw so many interesting things.

**Megha:** I mean, I thought the elevator was pretty interesting.

**Ryan:** You know, the elevator is probably my, that's probably the funniest thing that happened to me this week.

**Megha:** Yeah. It is insanely expensive to be here this week. And some of the people have done some really clever stuff to try and make this easier on themselves. For example, at one of the hotels we saw this one company bought an entire elevator so that their people could just go up and down without ever having to wait.

**Ryan:** I tried going on that special elevator later.

**Megha:** Did you get smacked around?

**Ryan:** I got smacked out of the elevator.

[Laughter]

So, it works I guess.

**Megha:** I felt so bad for the guy. I don't know, what do you call him? A bellman? I felt kind of bad for the guy because at one point he was like, "Anybody going up this way? Anybody going up?" And I was like, "Dude, just let us on." But of course, he'll get in trouble.

[Laughter]

**Ryan:** That is the most JPM thing possible.

**Megha:** It is. I did see something that was really funny. There was a guy yelling into his phone about antibodies in a Thai restaurant.

**Ryan:** Also very JPM. Or maybe that's just . . .

**Megha:** That might just be San Francisco.

**Ryan:** A coffee shop in Berkeley charged me 25 cents for a plastic cup today. Don't even get me started.

**Matt:** I know what you're wondering. How can I possibly keep tabs on how all these trends play out? Good news. I've got an easy answer. Subscribe to C&EN's newsletter. That way, all of the stories that you want and need from us will show up right in your inbox. Every week. Visit [cenm.ag/newsletter](http://cenm.ag/newsletter) to sign up.

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That's all for this episode. The music you're hearing now is "Go Get the Money" by Ateller. And we'll be back soon with another episode, so be sure to subscribe to *Stereo Chemistry* wherever you get your podcasts.

We've actually got a full episode devoted to climate change coming your way next week.

Kerri Jansen will be talking with early-career chemists about how they're taking on climate change and how they find optimism when the future seems so grim.

So until then . . .

**Megha:** I'm Megha S. And Ryan is . . .

**Ryan:** Ryan Cross. The science boss.