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Merck Secures UK's Verona Pharma in £7.8 Billion Acquisition

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In a bold move to bolster its respiratory health offerings, American pharmaceutical titan Merck & Co. has agreed to purchase UK-based Verona Pharma for approximately £7.8 billion. This acquisition, one of the largest in the sector this year, underscores Merck's ambition to diversify its portfolio and cement its position in the growing respiratory treatment market.

Verona Pharma, headquartered in London, has garnered attention for its pioneering work on ensifentrine, a novel therapy targeting chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This debilitating lung condition, affecting millions worldwide, causes persistent breathing difficulties and diminishes quality of life. With no cure, treatments like ensifentrine aim to alleviate symptoms and enhance lung function. Verona's drug, which combines bronchodilator and anti-inflammatory effects, has shown promising results in clinical trials and awaits approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), with a decision expected by late 2025.

Merck's decision to acquire Verona comes as it seeks to reduce reliance on its flagship cancer drug, Keytruda, which faces looming competition from biosimilars. The respiratory care market, driven by ageing populations and worsening air quality, offers significant growth potential. Verona's expertise in COPD positions Merck to capitalise on this trend, addressing a critical gap in healthcare.

A Merck spokesperson stated, "This deal strengthens our commitment to tackling chronic respiratory diseases, an area of increasing global need. Verona's innovative science complements our vision for delivering transformative therapies." The acquisition is expected to finalise by the end of 2025, subject to regulatory approval, with Verona continuing as a wholly owned subsidiary.

Industry experts see the move as a shrewd step for Merck. Dr. James Harper, a pharmaceutical analyst, noted in a recent interview with The Financial Times, "Verona's ensifentrine could redefine COPD treatment, and Merck's scale will accelerate its global reach." The deal highlights the UK's strength in biotech innovation, despite challenges faced by the

sector under the current Labour government's economic policies, which have drawn criticism for stifling investment.

This acquisition not only reinforces Merck's strategic pivot but also signals the rising importance of respiratory care in global healthcare. As Verona's promising therapy nears potential approval, the deal could mark a turning point for patients battling COPD and for Merck's enduring dominance in pharmaceuticals.