SME of the Month – Genoscience Pharma

Genoscience Pharma is an innovative SME located in Marseille, France. The company is tackling a fundamental challenge in the field of cancer treatment, cancer resistance and relapse. A reason for resistance can be the presence of small minority of cells in the tumor called cancer stem cells. Genoscience Pharma's drug candidate has the potential to treat intermediate and late-stage primary liver cancer patients, through its capability to reduce cancer stem cells. We interviewed Philippe Halfon, CEO and President of Genoscience Pharma, in our #SMEoftheMonth series.

How did Genoscience Pharma start out?

Genoscience Pharma was founded in 2001 with a first focus on Virology. Indeed, as a physician, I have a strong knowledge in HCV, HBV and HIV patients care. As cancer cells and viruses use common mechanisms to survive, including modifying its metabolism, we chose to change our focus toward Oncology in 2012 after the discovery of our current innovation, GNS561. Our discovery principles are to synthetize and develop new small molecules inhibiting lysosomal activity and acting against cancer stem cells. Today, our core activity remains in Oncology, mainly in liver but we expect to expand our indications in a very near future.

Can you tell us a bit more about your novel mechanism of action used in the delivery of your compound GNS561 and how disruptive it is compared to other anti-cancer drugs?

Our innovation, GNS561, is an anticancer agent, which concentrates in lysosomes to exert its activity. The subsequent intracellular modifications induced by GNS561 are of upmost importance as they are described to reduce the tumour metastatic potential and to overcome cancer resistance. In addition, our drug has a killing action on cancer stem cells, which are known to be responsible for cancer relapse and metastasis.

Could you expand on the main challenges facing your company in gaining access to the European market? What are the primary reasons why you are seeking to access the US and Chinese markets?

Today, our innovation is under clinical investigation in an international Phase 1b/2a, in Europe and US. In Europe, the main challenges faced by our company is the difficulty to get significant investments at our current stage. European venture capitals are too reluctant to invest and would rather like to invest once signals of efficacy are shown. However, at this time, the investment is easy for any venture capitalists. What we miss the most are VCs wishing to invest in high-potential/high-risk projects. For all these reasons, but also because of the different way of thinking abroad, we are currently seeking to reach the US and Asian markets. In addition, Asia represents 45% of the market in the liver cancer indication. Regarding the US, it is fundamental to access the US market for visibility matters. And last, but not the least, we are treating patients, and this is fundamental to extend our innovation to all patients in needing.

How important has been IP protection rules in the development of your new innovative drug candidate GNS561?

IP is of upmost importance at Genoscience Pharma. As an example, the discovery of our innovation occurred 6 years ago and yet, we are only submitting now our first publication on the matter. In a world where biotech companies often have a short lifetime and where competition is cruel, protecting our discovery is a key pillar. IP protection represents nearly 10% of the total expenses.

Philippe Halfon (President & CEO) and Cindy Khaldi (Translational Science Manager) at the 2018 Biotech SME Awards Ceremony in Brussels

What has been your biggest achievement in 2018?

Our biggest achievement in 2018 was the launch of our first-in-human clinical trial. After obtaining all regulatory authorizations in Europe and in the US, the first patient was enrolled in Jules Bordet Institute in April 2018. It was a great moment for all Genoscience Pharma team to achieve this step and to reach the patients, thinking back about the start of GNS561 story.

What is at the top of your agenda for the year 2019?

For this year coming, Genoscience Pharma has great expectations:

First signs of efficacy in our current clinical trial should be observed soon, when reaching the expected efficient dose level. We want to extend our clinical trial to others solid tumours (glioblastoma, pancreas, colorectal and lung cancers). Lastly, we want to open an US subsidiary to spread our ambitions to reach the US market and to find new investment opportunities.

What advice would you offer to other entrepreneurs seeking to build a sustainable opportunity in biotech?

Building a biotech company and make it sustainable is an everyday challenge. The competition is tough, and the technology evolves very quickly. Staying up to date is particularly important to do not miss any valuable information that could bring new perspectives to a project and never give up!

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About EuropaBio

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