Francesco Hofmann – VP & Head of R&D, Pierre Fabre Laboratories

We want to partner with biotechs around 'the making of the molecule,' whether small molecules or biologics

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In conversation at ESMO 2024, Pierre Fabre's R&D Head Francesco Hofmann outlines some of the key data readouts for the company's oncology portfolio from this year's conference, how it is looking to expand its R&D portfolio via business development deals and biotech partnerships, and the spaces in which a mid-sized European firm can compete against the big beasts of oncology.

How important is oncology to Pierre Fabre Laboratories today and what are some of its key recent milestones in the field?

Oncology is one of the main growth areas for Pierre Fabre Laboratories' pharmaceutical division and we now have several products on the market. Our footprint in oncology dates back to chemotherapies 40 years ago, while in the last seven to eight years, through partnerships with Puma and Array-Pfizer, we are now also able to bring targeted therapies to patients.

Neratinib, from our partnership with Puma is indicated for breast cancer, while encorafenib and binimetinib, from the Array-Pfizer deal are for melanoma and colorectal cancer with V-Raf Murine Sarcoma Viral Oncogene Homolog B (BRAF) mutations. Additionally, we recently received regulatory approval for encorafenib and binimetinib to be extended to non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) for adult patients with a $BRAF^{V600E}$ mutation, data for which is being shown at ESMO 2024.

Moreover, over the last year and a half, via a partnership with Atara Biotherapeutics, we are entering the cell therapy space for epstein-barr virus (EBV)-positive post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease (PTLD). We have already launched this very innovative therapy in Europe and are hoping for US approval in early 2025.

In terms of our R&D work, we want to continue to focus on targeted therapeutics in precision oncology and, to this end, have been building out the R&D portfolio over the last two years via business development (BD) deals. For example, Pierre Fabre Laboratories is actively collaborating with Scorpion Therapeutics on two molecules positioned in NSCLC; a muta-specific epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) Exon 20 inhibitor and a fourth generation EGFR inhibitor. Both are poised to enter the clinic very soon.

Then, just a year ago, we acquired Vertical Bio AG. Through this acquisition, we gained access to a monoclonal antibody targeting mesenchymal-epithelial transition factor (MET), focusing on NSCLC with MET genetic alterations. This is an antibody with a very differentiated mechanism of action that triggers the degradation of MET. From the preclinical profile, we believe that this could be a differentiated agent with a best-in-class profile.

In February 2024 we acquired exarafenib (a pan-RAF inhibitor) from Kinnate Biopharma, which complements our existing BRAF and mitogen-activated protein kinase (MEK) inhibitors. This fits Pierre Fabre Laboratories' efforts to strengthen its precision oncology portfolio, particularly for Neuroblastoma RAS Viral Oncogene Homolog (NRAS)-mutant melanoma and BRAF-driven tumours.

On the discovery side of things, we have been building out our internal capability quite significantly over the last 18 months and have hired more than 60 people in Toulouse, where we are concentrating our internal R&D footprint. Our aim is to make sure that in the discovery space we have a strong internal foundation in terms of disease biology, concept validation and translational aspects to move things into clinical development.

We want to partner with biotechs around 'the making of the molecule,' whether small molecules or biologics. We decided that it didn't make a lot of sense for us to build all this capability in-house, but rather leverage what is already out there and focus on what we do best.

Will we see more acquisitions in the coming years and how significant are the voices of the R&D team in choosing acquisition targets?

We are continuously on the lookout so there will certainly be more acquisitions to come, with R&D having a significant voice in the decision-making process. There is great support from our leadership and board for this new investment into R&D and an understanding of the overall goal of building out capabilities from early discovery all the way through to market authorization.

Walking around ESMO gives a clear illustration of who the big players in oncology are: generally, those with the biggest pavilions, the most impressive tech, and the best coffee machines. How can a medium-sized company like Pierre Fabre Laboratories differentiate itself and compete?

Fair question! Having spent a large part of my career in big pharma, I have a good feel for what they are focusing on; namely products that can potentially generate billions of dollars per year in revenues. For a company like Pierre Fabre Laboratories and most importantly in a domain like oncology and precision medicine, we have an opportunity to leverage spaces that do not meet this definition. There are more than enough unmet medical needs in these spaces which will allow us to sustain the company financially and – most importantly – ultimately make a difference to patients.

What do you hope to gain from attending conferences like ESMO?

A few different things. Firstly, it is an opportunity to engage with investigators for the trials that we are initiating. The second key point is the content of the conference and being able to witness important new data sets being explained. Thirdly, there are many opportunities around BD and meeting potential future partners at a conference of this scale and scope.

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