

Interview: Christian Bréchet - President, The Institut Pasteur, France



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The president of the Institut Pasteur talks about how they must build on their differentiating factors, with a focus on interdisciplinary research, why they are not a French institute with international partnerships, but an international institute that is based in France and how if there was one aspect he would like to be remembered for during his time as president, it would be to have installed their network of 33 international Pasteur institutes at the very heart of their strategic direction.

Mr Bréchet, could you please start by introducing yourself to our readers?

I hold MD Ph.D degrees, with a background in hepatology. I was educated at the Institut Pasteur, where I studied molecular biology, virology, and cellular biology, and I have been in contact with the institution ever since. In 1989 I became full professor of Cell Biology and Hepatology, and in 1997 I was appointed head of the clinical department of liver diseases at the Necker-Enfants Malades Hospital. From 2001 to 2007 I acted as General Director of Inserm, the French National

Agency for biomedical research. From 2008 to 2013 I was the vice-president in charge of Medical and Scientific affairs at the Institut Merieux. In 2013 I was appointed Institut Pasteur President, for a four-year mandate.

What is your overall vision for the Institut Pasteur?

The Institut Pasteur must build on its differentiating factors as compared to the other national and international research institutes. In my view what makes the Institut Pasteur unique across the globe is a blend of basic research, with 10 Nobel prize winners, alongside public health surveillance and the monitoring of infectious disease worldwide, education and training, partnerships with industry and the international context of our operations. There is only one institute across the world that has a focus on all these different areas, and that is the Institut Pasteur. If we were to have a focus on just one or two of these areas, then we would be just one amongst the many very good institutes.

What have been some of the main developments under your leadership?

A major focus of mine these past two years has been to offer considerably more attractive incentives for the recruitment of scientists. Over the last ten years, very attractive packages have been offered to junior scientists and we have further strengthened these. Yet regarding the mid and senior positions, our offers have not been attractive enough. Given that we are a private foundation, we can designate packages that are very different to those which you can offer in a public institute. We are facing both a challenge and an opportunity with the retirement of several of our principal investigators. Over the last two years we have recruited around 14 scientists from outside the Institut Pasteur, in both mid and senior positions, and ten in junior positions.

A second development has been to focus on interdisciplinary research. There has always been a question as to whether the Institut Pasteur should focus purely on infectious diseases and microbiology or whether we should be a truly interdisciplinary institute. We have had this debate, and we are clear that we must remain an interdisciplinary institute. We have looked to take advantage of our different field of research by ensuring we have real concrete interdisciplinary action, not merely the merging of isolated departments. We have focused on certain transversal actions: bioinformatics, integrative biology, which is at the heart of our strategy, but also some transversal structures across our 11 research departments. We have created four centers: the Center for Biomedical and Translational Science, the Center for Innovation and Technological Research, the Center for Global Health Research and Education, and the Center for Bioinformatics, Biostatistics and Integrative Biology. We have focused our programs in particular on a major scientific challenge

for the future, the link between microbes and non-communicable diseases. We have a program, called Brain and Microbes, which looks at how the bacteria of the intestine can modulate brain functions including psychology disorders, and how you can intervene when it comes to issues such as anxiety and depression.

A third area has been to focus on reinforcing our technological platforms. We are experiencing a complete overhaul in science, with a new paradigm, and Institut Pasteur must be at the forefront of the new technologies.

Fourth, we have set up novel programs to ensure we have a better connection between training, education and the Institut Pasteur. We have looked to ensure our approach is better integrated with the modern world. Industrial partnerships are key. We are looking to secure the early stage of integration, the nurturing of our early projects. At the Institut Pasteur, we are reinforcing the international visibility of our partnerships. We will be setting up an office in the USA, in either Boston or New York, and also in Asia, in Shanghai. I have also completely changed the rules regarding rewards to inventors, which had been highly restrained regarding the amount of money inventors could receive. We are now better able to compete with what is offered in Germany, Switzerland, the UK and the USA.

In 2009, your predecessor, Ms Alice Dautry was telling us how Institut Pasteur had very good relations with the numerous big Pharma companies. Have such relationships been maintained today?

The issue we have at the Institut Pasteur is the lack of visibility at the international level among small and mid-size businesses. The big multinationals, such as GSK, Pfizer and Sanofi, all know us and we still have excellent partnerships and several ongoing programs. The issue is that when you go to Boston or New York, only a handful of entrepreneurs know what the Institut Pasteur is about. This brings me to my primary focus areas these last few years, which has been to internationalize the institute. The Institut Pasteur is not a French institute with international partnerships, the Institut Pasteur is an international institute that is based in France. With each of the different focus areas, our network of 33 international Pasteur institutes, in 26 countries, is at the heart of the strategy from the very beginning.

Professor Eggermont, general director of Gustave-Roussy, was telling us how we are on the edge of phenomenal changes with regards to treating patients, with a focus on personalized treatment. To what extent is personalized care leading to a healthcare revolution?

We are living in a period of major scientific and technological progress. Personalized medicine has developed over the last ten years. The biggest progress has been made in oncology, and to a certain extent in diabetes and cardiovascular disease, but much less in infectious disease. On 28th October 2015, The Chan Soon-Shiong Institute for Molecular Medicine (CSSIOMM), in Los Angeles and the Institut Pasteur announced a partnership to establish The Pasteur Global Health Genomics Center (PGHGC). The aim of the PGHGC is to advance genomic research utilizing next-generation patient information systems needed to support the acquisition and usage of high-quality sequencing data. This is a clear example of the international network being at the heart of the Institut Pasteur's strategy. We want to switch from one model to another. The old model is that the Pasteur Institutes in the network will collect samples, which they send to Paris, where we conduct the analysis. The new model is to generate data on site and have a cloud computing network allowing us to share data across the network. Generating data in low and middle income countries will prove to be something which is rather unique. This will change the way we interact with patients.

Are there any plans to open up new Pasteur Institutes in other countries?

We are currently establishing the 33rd institute in Conakry, Guinea, having just signed the agreement two months ago. We are also very active in Brazil, reinforcing our position there, despite the difficult economic situation the country is facing. From the year 2000 we expanded into Asia: in China, with Hong Kong and Shanghai, and in South Korea, Seoul. We are not currently present in India or Turkey. The question is how we should develop in the new emerging countries. We know that in Africa we will have to develop a stronger presence, such as in Nigeria, which will become the next leader of the Africa continent. We also need to diversify our partnerships; we cannot create an Institut Pasteur everywhere. We will develop affiliated institutes within the network, diversifying the nature of our partnerships. Our strategy is to identify hubs, while also increasing the number of Pasteur Institutes.

There are two areas in the world where we have no presence at all as of today. First region, the Middle East, and we are in contact with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The second area where we have no presence is the United States. We have a Pasteur foundation in the US that is performing fundraising activities, but the question is what approach we should take when looking to set up a network in the US. Innovation takes place in France, but we all know the level of innovation in the US is extraordinary. My ambition is to be much more visible amongst the small and medium sized biotech companies in the US.

What legacy would you hope to leave behind as president of the Institut Pasteur?

If there is one aspect that I would like to be remembered for during my time as president of the Institut Pasteur, it would be to have installed this network at the heart of the institute.

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