Interview: Prof. Thierry Philip – President, Institut Curie, France



29.01.2016

Tags: Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, France, Institut Curie, Marie Curie, Government Relations, Regulation, Regulatory Reform, PPP, Public Private Partnerships, Interview, Insight

Prof. Thierry Philip, President of Institut Curie, is proud of the model that the institute is thriving for: excellent science and research in all forms, from the most basic to applied clinical medicine. As a Cancer Biology Center, it is not only one of the top institutes in France, but in Europe.

You have been the president of Institute Curie for two years now. You had to deal with a social plan, including layoffs, right at the start of your mandate. What have been some of the main developments under your leadership?

When I first took up my position, we were facing a major deficit in the hospital. We have gone a long way to fixing the issue in just two years. In 2013 the provisional deficit was ten million euros (USD 10.85 million). At the end of the year it was around three million euros (USD 3.25 million). The job was half done by structural changes, half by one-off measures for the year. There was also a layoff plan that involved suppressing 150 jobs. Ultimately, however, we only needed to lay off 39 people, as the rest decided to leave following the process of social programs. Our work to curb the deficit has proven to be productive, as demonstrated in 2015 where there was an excess in the hospital budget, and the outlook on the budget for the next five years looks positive.

During this period, we faced an important judicial review. The report following the screening was positive, and a series of 15 recommendations were made with the Minister of Health, all of which

have been accomplished under my mandate. We first had to decide whether to move people from different places into central locations. We decided not to directly consolidate locations, but rather to refocus and orient the 200 people in Orsay towards the biology of radiation and innovation in radiotherapy, and to make Orsay the location for l'Institut Curie for these disciplines because of the clinical protontherapy site one of the two in France. Following such moves, our excellent research center remains intact, with 1,000 people located in Paris. The best way to evaluate the center is to view the ERC – European Research Council funding scheme. It is a competitive scheme, designed around ten years ago, that awards funding to European institutions of around 1,5 to 2,5 million euros (USD 1.63 to 2.7 million) for five year periods. Institut Curie is proud to have received over 20 funding awards, a success rate approximately seven times higher than the French average. We therefore are one of the top institutes not only in France, but in all of Europe.

It seems in France there has been a deterioration in relations between public authorities and the pharma industry. What importance do you attach to academia/pharma translational research tie-ups to shorten the route between discovery and commercialization of promising drugs?

The relations between research institutions and the pharma industry are often cordial and even proactive. In our case, we share, among a lot of other cooperation, a particularly strong link with Servier. We have conducted a study on breast cancer in conjunction with Servier, and the industry is keen on continuing with such projects. The challenges for the Institut Curie has been in finding the necessary funds. We sometimes struggle to demonstrate that we are not inherently linked to the industry, but are an independent research institute producing excellent scientific research. Nevertheless, after discussion with our board, we decided to retain our ties with Servier as they have proven to be proactive partners. Our institute has remained independent and Servier has proven to be cooperative, creating no situation for us to break this connection. In addition, we have every reason to stand by and assist those who come to our aid during difficult times.

Do you believe there is a need for special collaboration between the academic world and the pharma industry in order to foster the discovery and commercialization of new products?

We need to establish a network among universities, hospitals, research centers, and the pharmaceutical industry. If one is lacking, the entire system is lacking. We need collaboration between French universities and research facilities as well – take for example our close relationship with Institut Pasteur. Research cannot be conducted without universities or university hospitals. Open collaboration is necessary to keep transparency and communication between the public and

private sector, local and international instructions. This is an area where Institut Curie can always improve, as no progress can be made alone. Even with our success as a research institute and a hospital clinic, it is always important to foster multilateral and international cooperation.

Institut Curie aims to spread medical & scientific innovations and knowledge throughout France and the world. What importance do you attach to internationalization, to embracing your role not only as a leader in France but also on the international stage?

Regarding research institutes, we are part of a program called EU-LIFE involving thirteen institutes throughout the EU that have an interest in cancer research and conduct research at a comparable level. We seek to share our strategies and findings, as well as the way we develop training and execute human resources, and thereby learn and grow from implementing each other's best practices. Progress has also been made at an EU level to create more equality by gender throughout our institutions.

One initiative through which we are seeking to develop an international dimension, is the 2015-20 project, aiming to refocus our efforts on the key field of cancer biology. It is important for us to work towards this in every aspect of our institute's mission. Through our training programs, we look forward to establish a universal culture and a common vision between doctors, academics and industry leaders.

Institut Curie hosts students from around the globe at all levels. What do you see as the main challenges regarding the training and education of oncology in France?

Establishing a true PhD program has been an important initiative. This has entailed linking a PhD program with the latest ongoing research and the latest medicines in order to establish a more practical and hands-on approach when nurturing the next generation of doctors and researchers. Bringing together a diverse, international faculty and student body has been a challenge for us, but has been a goal that we have striven to achieve to continue producing exemplary results. With a program boasting over 40 nationalities – as well as one of the most balanced research institutions in regards to gender in Europe – we are excited to continue our pursuit of excellence into the future in order to further establish Institut Curie as an establishment of international significance.

It is estimated that nearly one in two cancer deaths in France could be avoided. What impact do you believe the government's Cancer Plan 2014-2019 action plan can have in promoting early diagnosis and guaranteeing access for all to quality medicine and innovations?

Cancer is the leading cause of death in France – half of the patients of which are over 70 years old in an ever aging society – with a budget of approximately seventeen billion euros (USD 18.46 billion). This is markedly low when you consider that the budget for social security is bigger than the national budget of France! This is clearly not the area to be making any budget cuts, but rather, is an area where further initiatives should be made.

The problem in France is that funding from a national level seeks equality, but lacks objectives and a concise plan, which leaves some important initiatives, such as cancer research, underfunded. There is a lack of a business plan – everything is paid for by the state, yet there is an uncertainty whether money will be allocated to which project, and if so, how much. The French industry does not know how to navigate this type of uncertainty. I believe this is why we are seeing success in the healthcare sciences in other nations in Europe, including Italy, Spain and Belgium, but we are finding difficulties here in France. What the nation needs is a business model – even if less money is allocated. When the industry has knowledge of how much will be directed to whom, the health of the industry will improve. Even on a microeconomic level, it has been a challenge to fund and direct the hospital and research at the Institut, but we have been coping and still finding success.

In what ways can Institut Curie serve as an exemplary model for the rest of the pharma industry?

One of the important initiatives of our institution is to have research within the hospital. The current model for drug development within the pharma industry is to work with one institution for practical work and with other institutions for clinical trials. Our aim is to link the two and to have people within the same institution working on both the practical and the clinical work within the same organization. We believe there is great added value to be found by having these specialists within the same institution working together. This, however, is not typical with private companies in the pharmaceutical industry which do not operate this way, although the industry culture is slowly changing.

In this regard, we believe that we are at the forefront of modernizing organizational structure, exemplified in our work with biotech research. Research has been conducted at Institut Curie, followed immediately by first round clinical trials by parallel teams on site. This organizational structure can only be a win-win for pharma as research specialists can speak directly with doctors of the same institution. It is also a win-win for the Institute Curie as it stimulates a culture of creativity, fostering an environment where new ideas can be developed during interactions of various actors during clinical trial phases. Having an interdisciplinary approach has also been an underlying factor that demonstrates the uniqueness and success at Institut Curie. Our

interdisciplinary approach incorporates cutting-edge physics, chemistry, and biology. This has inspired many doctors to choose to work at a center like Institut Curie over a hospital because of this commitment to such an organizational structure.

Click here to read more articles and interviews from France, and to download the latest free pharma report on the country.

See more interviews