

Interview: André Chouluka - Chairman and CEO, Collectis, France



23.02.2016

Tags: [Pharma](#), [Pharmaceuticals](#), [Collectis](#), [André Chouluka](#), [Gene editing](#), [Servier](#), [pfizer](#), [CAR-T](#), [Interview](#), [Insight](#), [M&A](#), [Executive](#), [Exclusiv](#)

André Chouluka, founder & CEO of Collectis, reveals why the 21st century will be the century of gene editing and Collectis will be one of the leaders of this revolution; how unlike many of their competitors, they are a gene editing company at the core and why the idea of having a three way deal appealed to Collectis, allowing Servier to exercise an early option on UCART 19, an allogeneic CAR-T cell therapy for hematological malignancies, and allowing Pfizer to license part of the rights from Servier

Pfizer, Servier and Collectis have recently announced a three-way deal to develop CAR-T immunotherapy. Tell us more about this deal and how it will allow you to advance Collectis' mission of designing the next generation immunotherapies based on gene-edited CAR-T cells?

We had an initial agreement that was signed with Servier in February 2014, where Servier exercised an exclusive worldwide licensing option with Collectis for UCART19, an allogeneic CAR-T cell therapy for hematological malignancies. We also signed an agreement with Pfizer in June 2014 based on the same type of oncology application. As Collectis has been developing UCART19, there has been a lot of interest from different partners in acquiring the rights in the US for this gene-editing technology. As three partners working together, we decided that the best option would be

to license out the rights to Pfizer. We have an excellent relationship with Pfizer, with whom we have been working for over one and a half years.

The overall idea of having a three-way deal appealed to Cellectis as it would allow Servier to exercise an early option on UCART 19, and Pfizer to license part of the rights from Servier. Under the terms of the agreement, Pfizer and Servier will work together on a joint clinical development program for UCART19 and share development costs. Pfizer will be responsible for potential commercialization of UCART19 in the United States, and Servier will retain marketing rights in countries outside the United States. Yet Cellectis is not a service company, we do not provide products for clients. The way our portfolio is structured is that we have a category of Cellectis self-owned products that we are developing, all of them in liquid tumors. Then we have a number of products that we are working on for Pfizer and Servier.

Many Big Pharma companies have shown an interest in CAR-T therapies recently. Why will Cellectis succeed where other more established players will fail?

First, we have partners that are extremely strong. Servier has always had good foresight in this field, signing early-stage deals with companies that are particularly innovative. We are proud to work with them. Likewise, Pfizer is also a great partner for Cellectis. We stand out from our competitors due to our long-term experience in the field of gene editing. An approach that we are pushing for, in which we lead with our partners, is using this technology to treat each patient with individualized products. The treatment is personalized per patient, retrieving their own T cells. Cellectis is the first to have developed such a technology. The gene editing technologies we are pursuing in this field are far in advance of our competitors'. Cellectis is the first company doing gene edited CAR-T. Having started working on this field back in 1999, we were the first gene editing company in the world. Before us such a concept did not even exist.

When I first claimed that we were leaders in this field, people would tell me that leaders have followers and as you have no followers, you are certainly not a leader! Today this field is becoming increasingly competitive. But the very fact that many of our competitors are now investing in gene editing only serves to validate the approach we have taken. There is still so much to be done in this space, and Cellectis is happy to see more companies taking an interest in the area of allogeneic gene editing, helping to provide further momentum in this field.

Tell us more about your strategy to develop CAR-T therapies?

We decided in 2013 to focus 100 percent of the attention of Cellectis on CAR-T and oncology, in particular our portfolio in leukemia. Everything that fell outside of this space was stopped. We

believe that CAR-T will be one of the big revolutions in the field of oncology, and as a small company we cannot afford to over-diversify ourselves. Unlike many of our competitors, we are a gene editing company at our core. This is our biggest strength and the core know-how of the company. We know how to modify any gene in an extremely powerful, safe and precise manner. The future of cell therapy is in gene editing. Either you do cell therapy and you have a limited future or you do gene editing with cell therapy, and the 21st century is yours.

In 2013 came a big wave of new technologies, led by US companies. Today I believe that gene editing will be the next therapeutic tsunami for the coming five years. There is no limit to what gene editing can bring to molecular medicine. The first patient that was cured through gene editing was treated this summer, but this is merely the beginning.

In 2009 you told us, in your capacity as President of France Biotech, that the goal was to explain to the government, investors and community, the principles around biotechnology and the potential returns for France over the long term. Do you think there is now a better understanding of the importance of biotechnology to France's future?

Awareness of the potential of biotechnology has increased across the world. The UK, for one, is currently investing substantially in this area and France must not become complacent. Most countries have this awareness; the issue is that government cannot shoulder all the financial burden. You have to have a strong financing, from seed money to big funds, which invest in this space. Across the stock markets in France, and in the whole of Europe, we have seen this industry continue to grow. One of my objectives as the then President of France Biotech was, by 2015, to have at least three biotechs hitting over one billion dollars of market cap in France. Today, we are more than three with over one billion dollars of market cap. Having said that, the US is still a large part of the innovation that is occurring today. 85 percent of the biotech market remains in the US. The depth of their market is huge. This year we dual-listed Cellectis. We are now listed on the Paris stock exchange and on the NASDAQ.

We have heard that the French environment is a difficult one in which to grow and develop biotech companies. Does the fact you listed in the US tell us something about the state of things in France?

Absolutely not. I still believe this is a great country for innovation with extremely talented people. However it can be difficult to source people in France and the depth of the market is greater in the US. Cellectis has a strong partnership with Pfizer, as well as with Weill Cornell Medical College and

the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. Consequently, we need to have a presence in the US and we need to raise more capital. Raising 100 million dollars in France is a considerable challenge. Cellectis raised 228 million dollars by listing on the NASDAQ in March 2015. Nevertheless, we remain very keen to have a center in France, a great country for our development.

You founded Cellectis over 15 years ago. What will the next 15 years bring? Will you remain an independent biopharmaceutical company, or end up being acquired by a Big Pharma company?

You don't sell yourself, you get bought out, and this is not my strategy. My ambition is to have our own portfolio of products hitting the market. We have a series of products that we are currently developing that hold tremendous potential in the liquid tumor space. In the future we will consider further diversifying in the solid liquid space. I want to see our partners, namely Pfizer and Servier, achieve great results with our technologies, because their success is our success, not only on the communication front, but also on the financial side. We may also look to diversify the company away from the CAR-T oncology space, always using the power of gene editing. Our vision is very important. There is nothing that goes off-fashion as fast as a trend. You have to keep to your business model and your vision. Gene editing is our vision. Gene editing is not going to go away. It started 15 years ago and will remain one of the main drivers not only in healthcare, but in life sciences. In the future we are going to eat gene editing, wear gene editing, and cure ourselves with gene editing! The 21st century will be the century of gene editing and Cellectis will be one of the leaders of this revolution.

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

[See more interviews](#)