

Interview: Jean-Luc Bélingard - Chairman, bioMérieux, France



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Jean-Luc Bélingard, chairman of bioMérieux, reveals how the medical community in France has a unique profile, combining both clinical and technological experience, leading to what he describes as the best healthcare system in the world from a pure patient perspective; why diagnostics is the bedrock of an efficient healthcare system; and how bioMérieux is the number one IVD company in microbiology in the world, with about 42 percent of the global market.

Mr Bélingard, as a man with over 40 years of experience in the healthcare industry, how would you characterize the French healthcare system of today?

From a pure quality perspective, if I were a patient today, there would be one country that I would want to be treated in, and that would be France. Above and beyond issues such as health economics and regulatory affairs, we should be proud of the fact that we have, in my opinion, the best healthcare system in the world. The medical community in this country has a unique profile, a blend of both clinical and technological experience. Doctors in France are clinicians; our country has a longstanding history in clinical therapy. Beyond this tradition, however, we have also adopted the most sophisticated technologies, from sequencing to IRMs. This unique combination, of doctors conceptualizing their medical approach on the basis of convergence between their clinical

experience and their technology knowhow, produces an end result that is extremely effective from a medical standpoint. Unlike technology driven markets , France is medically driven and has high quality healthcare with famous and well-recognized KOLs, champion companies, and unique medical expertise. This is probably the greatest asset we have. If there is value in this country, it comes from our medical care system.

Where do diagnostics and in particular bioMérieux, as a national French champion, fit into this picture?

Deeply rooted in our genes is the notion of adequate diagnostics, something that is both technology and medically driven. The fact that the number one microbiology diagnostic company in the world, namely bioMérieux, is based in France, underlines this point. Microbiology is a medical discipline, and in this country medical doctors treat infectious diseases with that dual perspective. As a company with almost ten thousand employees, our greatest asset is our medical culture, grounded in an excellent understanding of bacteria. When we talk about an expertise in diagnostics, we are not referring to sophisticated technologies, which we possess, but a deeply rooted understanding of infectious diseases.

Someone once said to me that the most expensive disease is the one that does not have a medical treatment. This is certainly the case. Therapeutic solutions are deeply rooted in adequate diagnostics. A medical doctor without the proper diagnostics tools, the bedrock of an efficient healthcare system, is blind. The convergence of clinical and technology-based diagnostics is key. bioMérieux acts a key link in the medical value chain.

In an environment of cost-cutting measures, where healthcare expenditures are increasingly unsustainable, how do you see the future of diagnostics?

Diagnostics has a great future ahead of it. It accounts for only three percent of total healthcare expenditures today; and yet is the best way to effectively treat a medical condition, from a therapeutic standpoint, is proper diagnostics. It is also the best way to save on medical expenditure. From a technology point of view, it is also a nascent sector. The promise of future technologies is considerable, greatly increasing the clinician's understanding of any medical condition.

Laurent Amiel, president of Abbott France, was telling us how diagnostics should not be seen as a cost but rather as an investment in the future. What role can industry play in creating this paradigm shift?

I have been working in the healthcare industry since 1974. For the last 40 years the same concerns have been raised: the authorities do not properly appreciate the value of diagnostics, they permanently put pressure on our prices and augment regulatory constraints. I believe that the primary responsibility lies with the industry itself, that has not been able to convey the value of its services. It is our responsibility to promote the importance of diagnostics. The public affairs side of healthcare approaches does not have the visibility and the power that it deserves. We have forgotten that we are about medical value. At bioMérieux we do not sell products, we sell medical value. Very few companies in our industry have adopted this culture and I hope to see this change in the future.

What importance do you attach to breaking down silos between actors such as pharmaceutical, medical device and in vitro diagnostic companies in the healthcare industry?

The reasons behind a particular illness are multidimensional, due to a convergence of numerous factors. You do not have a disease for any one simple reason. As a consequence, therapy also has to be multifactorial. The silos between medical devices, diagnostics and pharmaceutical companies must be broken down. During my time heading Roche Diagnostics for over 10 years in Basel, by the late 1990s we started to talk about personalized medicine and biomarkers. Today you have biomarkers, but their development has been a long time in coming. The notion of the multifactoriality of medical therapy is still rather new and will take time to emerge.

Turning to bioMérieux and your strategy for international development, how would you characterize your global footprint?

We are by a large margin the number one IVD company in microbiology in the world, with about 42 percent of the global market. bioMérieux has almost 10 thousand employees in total, of whom more than three thousand five hundreds are based in France. We have 40% of our employees in this country, a market that represents 10 percent of our revenues. Our roots are firmly in France but our reach is truly global. Today we have a very balanced portfolio of geographies, with dedicated affiliates in 42 countries and a presence in 150 countries.

We are an enterprise in the true sens of the word. Mr Alain Mérieux is an entrepreneur who created bioMérieux over 50 years ago (we celebrated our 50th anniversary in 2013). We entered the Chinese market 24 years ago, being one of the first healthcare companies to establish a footprint there. We have been in Brazil for 42 years now and next year will be marking 40 years in Germany. bioMérieux is a company that significantly invest in R&D; 12 percent of our turnover

versus an average of 8-10 percent for a diagnostic company. It is only sustainable to pursue such a strategy by leveraging such investments over a broad range of geographies.

With the acquisition of the US company, BioFire, in 2014, how do you see the US market and what did this particular deal bring to bioMérieux?

The US remains the hub of innovation in the world, and this goes well beyond the healthcare space. By not having proximity to such a reality implies you are missing something. This explains our focus on the US market, which comprises more than 40 percent of the global diagnostic market. Historically the US represented around 25 percent of bioMérieux's revenues. We acquired BioFire in 2014 for two main reasons, technology and geographic balance. Today over 30 percent of our revenues are derived from the US. BioFire provides us with three key strengths: first, time to result, second, multiplexing and third, a syndromic approach. A syndromic approach is based on analyzing a set of symptoms and testing for multiple potential causes of disease. Many infectious diseases have a common clinical presentation caused by a variety of pathogens. BioFire technology allows physicians to apply a syndromic approach to infectious disease testing using a single reagent. The syndromic approach helps to eliminate guesswork and identify different pathogens faster than ever.

Mr Bélingard, in January 2016, you officially became president of Fefis, the employers' union for healthcare companies in France. What is your vision for the future of Fefis? What made you the right candidate for this particular job?

My ambition is to lead Fefis by strengthening the voice of the healthcare industry, an industry that has everything to be one of the proudest in France. We represent 900 companies, totalling 65 billion euros (82.61 billion USD) in revenues, employing 200 thousand people directly at 1,400 sites in France and 100 thousand jobs indirectly. Each company provides a certain level of expertise and some specific technologies, helping to make France one of the most important healthcare countries in the world. Fefis required someone who had a broad range of experience that went beyond both pharma and diagnostics. I ran Roche Diagnosis for 10 years, have been in pharma for many years and have been active in the field of medical devices; I have had multiple exposures to the healthcare industry, in France but also overseas.

To conclude, what do you see as three key characteristics of the French healthcare system and three key strengths regarding bioMérieux?

France has both a high-quality healthcare system and a deeply rooted medical culture. Indeed, many medical disciplines have been invented by French leaders, from neurology to paediatrics and

surgery. Unfortunately, the country has yet to fully embrace its healthcare industry, a core element of its healthcare independence and economic well-being. There are very few truly global healthcare industries in the world; in this regards France stands alongside countries such as the US, Japan and the UK. When it comes to bioMérieux, a key strength is our entrepreneurial spirit. We are a global and multicultural company, but one that retains its strong French roots.

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