Interview: Benoit Dubuis – Chairman, Campus Biotech, Switzerland



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How would you present the strengths of the Lake Geneva region's strengths to our international audience?

The Lake Geneva region, which we often call the 'health valley of Switzerland', benefits from having two intersecting innovative clusters, one in MedTech and another in biotech. Looking at the course of life sciences development the field is headed in a direction where a distinction between MedTech and biotech is gradually fading away; some of the most exciting innovation is taking place at the crossroads between related fields including medicine, biology, biotech, chemistry, micro and nano technologies, and information and communications technology.

Geneva has a degree of strength in all of these domains. Historically, the region has had a very advanced watch making industry which involved working on technologies which were highly complex and had to be extremely reliable, micro-mechanics, and the culture which developed around this industry has had a strong influence on the development of medical technologies in the region. As for the aspects of medicine, biology and biotech, just walk around Geneva and you will see streets named after a variety of famous and ground breaking physicians who lived and worked in Geneva.

Specifically in biotechnology, Geneva has been a source of several fantastic success stories already. Serono, which was acquired by Merck, came to Geneva in the 1970s and continued its growth under Fabio and then Ernesto Bertarelli; by the time of its sale in 2006, it was the third largest biotech company in the world. Biogen was also founded in Geneva before moving on – the "gen" in Biogen initially stood for Geneva rather than anything to do with genetics or genome. As such, there is now a strong heritage and tradition of biotech in the region, and a wealth of experience and talent associated with it.

With thriving innovative clusters in Biotech and Medtech, the historical legacy to support their development, and a rich environment with opportunities for cross-functional collaboration I believe that we are extremely well positioned for the future.

What is Campus Biotech's role within this environment?

[Featured_in]

Campus Biotech is backed by two main organizations, the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne which is oriented towards engineering, and the University of Geneva which is focused more on basic research. We also have the support of two entrepreneurs who on top of their engagement have provided significant financial support to our efforts, Hansjörg Wyss and Ernesto Bertarelli and his family. Our role is to capitalize on these assets and help facilitate the translation of basic ideas into applications, and applications into attractive development opportunities which can then be converted into products and services. This is what translational research is aiming for..

From another perspective, we want to make sure that fantastic companies born in Geneva can prosper and grow here too. In Biogen's case, the cluster was not well developed when they were founded in 1978 so they left – the hope is that the future Biogen will benefit from Campus Biotech and thus root into our region.

What is your strategy for accomplishing this?

We are guided by three major themes, the first of which is to generate innovation at the crossroads between disciplines and encourage cross-functional collaboration and research.

Second, to encourage and leverage collaboration; our goal is not to duplicate anything already being done by a university or other organization, but to focus just on bringing together the groups and researchers active around our two themes of digital and global health, and neuroscience. If we bring together talented and experienced people from these fields and get them to interact, they will generate new ideas and innovation.

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The third theme is the translation and development aspect, and to this end we seek to connect startups to the support and opportunities they need to succeed. In one aspect, this means being close to a hospital for early stage clinical development; the Geneva University Hospital is one of our main stakeholders. More generally however, this means hosting organizations who have the resources and expertise to support projects to achieve success, the Wyss Center being a perfect example. The Wyss Center was created following a donation in the region of 100s of millions from Hansjörg Wyss, who founded the company Synthes which was sold to Johnson & Johnson. The Wyss Center for Bio and Neuroengineering provides both funding and technical resources to facilitate the development of clinical solutions from neuroscience research, and these technical resources include experts in manufacturing, clinical development, regulatory affairs, IP protection, and business management, as well as science and engineering.

In this vein we also just launched the Campus Biotech Innovation Park. This is our direct translational arm – our university partners do research, that research is translated into applications with the support and advice of different foundations and organizations, and once viable companies are created they can be based in the innovation park and benefit from the other incubators in the ecosystem. Campus Biotech is here to give access to the scientific and technical facilities, to provide all these parties a place to gather, and to ensure that everyone is working together and that the synergies between groups are being leveraged.

Many companies have succeeded in the past without such infrastructure and support – why is this all needed today?

Surely some companies would succeed on their own, but how fast would they grow? And how many would fail that could succeed with the right support? We have many start-ups growing at 10 to 15 percent per year, but to really make a big success and have an impact you need 50 to 100 percent growth. Thus, our efforts are to help more companies avoid failure, and more of those companies to truly succeed.

Take Manteia – this was a company established by Serono in Geneva which was at the forefront of genetic sequencing, but didn’t get very far and was closed down in 2003. Their technology was bought by Solexa, which was eventually acquired by Illumina, and thus today it is technology which was originally developed in Geneva that is contributing to Illumina’s growth. If this were to happen today, there would be a much stronger chance for Manteia to grow and thrive here in Geneva.

Sophia Genetics is a wonderful example of a recent success in this sense, a rising leader in data driven medicine. The company was born about five years ago, starting out with only a handful of people; they ended last year with 50 people and will end this year with 180. Already the company is working with 200 hospitals and is present in 30 countries, and they are really building international visibility and having an impact at the international level.

How can Campus Biotech help connect startups to high risk funding sources in the early stages?

There are different funding sources; VC funds are an important one, but there are also wealthy individuals with family offices that invest directly in companies. They invest all over the world – our role is to provide good opportunities, and the funding will be there from this source for companies that have a convincing value proposition.

On the VC side, Geneva is of course a financial center and has a number of important funds with offices here. The internationally known Index Ventures was founded here in Geneva, and Blackrock is setting up an office in central Geneva at present – their arrival is very interesting as it proves you can find many attractive investment opportunities in Geneva. Many funds in Paris have strong connections with Geneva, and other European and even American funds which don't have offices here do consistently scout in the region.

Funding is certainly available in Geneva – in fact there have been periods when its perhaps been too easy to get funding. Competition for resources is certainly a good thing for both the industry and investors.

The other challenge is finding the right talent with the right experience – do you find for these key individuals it's difficult to keep them?

Geneva is a very nice place to live and offers an exceptional quality of life. It's easy to attract people here, many people who retire here choose to stay, and as salaries are relatively high in Geneva compared to the rest of Europe is very attractive for people coming from France for example. So if you need to headhunt a very specific individual with a particular set of skills, talent, and track record, convincing them to come to Geneva is relatively easy compared to many other cities.

On the other hand, we have a wealth of life science expertise and talent already in the region. There have been several cycles of biotech companies since the 1970s, and with the University of Geneva, the EPFL, HEC and IMD all turning out young scientists, engineers, and professionals there is no shortage of talent. Moreover, we clearly have a strong cluster dynamic; this was best

demonstrated by the absorption of the Serono workforce that found themselves out of a job when Merck closed the Serono HQ in 2012 – the majority of workers found new jobs relatively quickly in and around Geneva.

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