

Robert Fabregat - CEO, Biocat



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Robert Fabregat, CEO of Biocat, explains how health start-ups in the BioRegion of Catalonia managed to raise a record EUR 238 million in 2021 and why the Spanish region is set to become a hub for advanced therapies and personalized medicine. In addition, the CEO boasts about Catalonia being at the top in terms of scientific publications and ERC grants compared to countries with a similar size such as Denmark and Finland.

Robert, can you begin by briefly commenting on your background and the path that led you to lead Biocat?

My education is in chemistry with a PhD focused on pharmacy and the development of drugs. After completing my PhD, I received a Master's degree in Project Management while teaching at the University of Barcelona. Consequently, I developed experience as an R+I project manager at the Institute for Bioengineering of Catalonia and later at Synapse Research Management Partners.

My career then turned to a political path, and I was given the opportunity to work as the Chief of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Health in the Government of Catalonia and then as Director-General for Research and Innovation. This involved responsibility for the research institutions within the health system and hospitals of Catalonia.

Finally, the position of CEO opened up for Biocat and I was approved by the public-private Board of Trustees. I am enthusiastic for this job and hope to accomplish the promotion of the entire

ecosystem including research, transfer of technology, and innovation from a global perspective.

Three years have passed since the last time we interviewed the head of Biocat. Can you update us on the main developments since then and the main ways in which the organization promotes the biological industry in Catalonia?

Despite the pandemic, the last year has been exceptional. Health startups in the BioRegion managed to raise EUR 238 million in 2021, a new record and the life sciences and healthcare system in Catalonia grew from representing 7.3 percent in 2018 to 8.7 percent of the region's GDP in 2021. Moreover, employment has increased with a growing number of employers from more than 1300 companies in the ecosystem. Likewise, the number of start-ups has increased as well as therapies that are developing in advanced phases. These are just some of the figures from the [2021 BioRegion of Catalonia Report](#), presented in January 2022, which Biocat has published since 2009.

Biocat focuses on technology transfer and collaborates with the BioRegion to identify projects that are able to be developed. Biocat helps the identified projects develop methods for financing themselves through programs or financing proof of concepts.

The second challenge is to accelerate these projects through discussions with investors by providing a picture of the development of Catalonia and its projects. Biocat is the first point of contact for investors to find potential investments prior to contacting research centres and hospitals. Furthermore, Biocat aims to educate people and businesses as they require regarding business development and management.

Finally, Biocat works to attract and maintain the investments for the companies to consolidate the entire ecosystem. This aligns with the organization's goal to increase the potential of the ecosystem and assist in incorporating innovation and new technologies within the health system as quickly as possible. As a result, this improves the healthcare system and, ultimately, helps people in need of medical services.

What makes Catalonia the most advanced and established life sciences hub in Spain?

Catalonia is special for the heterogeneity of its ecosystem. The region has excellent research centres with results that are competitive with the rest of Europe. Catalonia is at the top in regards

to its publications and gathering ERC grants compared to countries with similar sizes such as Denmark and Finland.

Furthermore, Catalonia has 1,155 clinical trials underway and ranks eighth in the world in active projects and sixth in Europe. The clinical areas with the most active clinical trials in Catalonia are oncology, diseases of the central nervous system, dermatology, ophthalmology, cardiovascular diseases and rare diseases.

The Catalan health ecosystem is home to high-quality hospitals and healthcare centres that work together with the research centres and universities within a strong public health system that provides assistance to the entire population of the region and generates significant health data as a result. Moreover, the investment network in Catalonia specializes in the healthcare system and attracts international investors due to the reliability and strength of the ecosystem.

Finally, the private dynamic ecosystem possesses a variety of companies of all sizes with an increasing number of startups, spin-offs, and digital businesses over the last few years.

What are some of the trends in the sector that Catalonia will be able to take advantage of?

Catalonia is consolidating itself to become a hub for advanced therapies and personalized medicine. There are several hospitals in the region that are developing their own CARTs despite customarily being developed by private companies. Additionally, the high-quality centres in the region for oncology, genomics, and rare diseases highlight the ability of Catalonia to focus on personalized medicine. Similarly, the Barcelona Supercomputing Center can use its data for the personalization of therapies.

Following the pandemic, digital health has become an additional focus for Catalonia as the quantity of digital health companies in the region has grown significantly in this time. Furthermore, digital health companies have seen nearly twice as much investment as in 2020, consolidating the increase in funds raised for the fifth year in a row with over EUR 60 million.

Of course, we also face some challenges, such as, maintaining the sustainability of the health system. In addition to, the increasing impact of climate change on the health system and the population.

How do you accommodate the position of the public setting to produce more of their own CAR-Ts for example?

While some public hospitals can develop the therapies, there is a point when the knowledge or capabilities of the hospital are not sufficient to take those products to the greater market. Therefore, public-private collaborations are mandatory for the best practice to be developed and transparency must be necessary because its origin and the generation of this knowledge comes from public institutions

In Catalonia, Hospital Clinic Barcelona already has two, one for patients with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (the only CAR-T developed wholly in Europe to be approved by a regulatory agency) and another for multiple myeloma. Hospital Sant Pau also successfully completed phase I with its CAR-T therapy and will begin another trial in the first quarter of 2022.

How is the organization funded and where do you destinate the majority of resources obtained?

The budget is approximately a representation of the Board of Trustees; divided evenly between the public funding received from the Government of Catalonia and the Council of Barcelona as well as the private funding from a range of competitive programs and sponsors. Our primary focus is to facilitate the promotion of the ecosystem while providing training and the development of talent to grow the businesses in the region for the greatest economic and social impact.

Which companies are having the largest impact in Catalonia?

The largest Catalan company is Grifols followed by other historic big players such as Esteve, Almirall, or Ferrer. Furthermore, certain companies such as Hipra are demonstrating that knowledge used for animal health could be transferred to human health and are working on a COVID-19 vaccine. In February Hipra has advanced in its COVID-19 vaccine, moving into phase III clinical trials prior to commercialization. Similarly, Reig Jofre has adapted its process to develop the Janssen vaccine. However, the sum of all the pieces, including the smaller companies, startups and spinoffs are crucial for the expansion and success of the ecosystem.

What are you doing to attract more talent to the Catalonia BioRegion?

Public-private collaborations need to go further in Catalonia. Following the pandemic, there has been a democratization of innovation with increased sharing of information, data, and corroborations that is producing strong results. It's important to increase the training and recruitment of talent in this area, and as a result, Biocat aims to teach those with scientific backgrounds business and management practices in order to improve the quality of talent in the region.

Looking into the future, what do you hope to achieve as CEO?

The first goal is to consolidate the ecosystem with a focus on advanced therapies and personalized medicine. This involves creating a collaborative network that could become one of the main medical ecosystems in Europe and the first in the south of the continent.

The second goal is to close the cycle for the technology developed by the public sector to return into the public system at affordable prices to improve the population's quality of life.

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