

ASEBIO â?? Regina Revilla, President â?? Spain



06.08.2014

Tags:

[biotech](#), [innovation](#), [investment](#), [technology transfer](#)

For many years, Spain's biotechnology sector was lagging behind the powerhouses of countries like the US and UK. Today, the sector touts a significantly different story, due to strategic investments by Spain's government. Regina Revilla, president of Spain's biotech association ASEBIO, details the history of biotech in Spain and outlines the country's areas for potential growth.

Could you outline the evolution of biotechnology in Spain for our readers?

Spain was behind other countries for many years, along with other southern European countries, behind the biotech boom of the 1980s. Biotechnology is of course a fairly new sector, and the individuals creating companies within that sector today are quite young. These people belong to a new generation and have a very good understanding the globalized nature of the market today despite recent difficult times. Access to capital is undoubtedly an issue for biotech companies today, and those running such companies often have to be very creative to obtaining loans, funds and grants. However, much has changed since the 1980s, allowing individuals to more access than before in Spain. This is the result of changes in administrative policies and changes in organizations that allow people to have access to opportunities. In the 80s, it was prohibited to create a company if an individual worked at a university or institute. The lift on this ban spawned an entirely new generation of aerospace, IT and health companies from university research departments and national centers. In the case of health biotechnology, it was not quite the same because development is much longer in this sector. This process took a long time, but things have changed dramatically. With the creation of the National Health System, the infrastructures and foundation for hospitals have developed a huge amount of activity in basic and translational research at hospitals that arrived to the market immediately. As a consequence, many small companies were created that have gone on to become quite competitive internationally.

According to a 2012 OECD report the volume of companies has increased 359% over the last decade, placing it in second place within the OECD. What makes Spain such a great place to develop biotech?

Spain has invested a great deal of capital in this area, and ranks fifth in Europe and seventh worldwide for scientific production. Perhaps the country is not as strong as some other parts of the world, but we have had a number of novel ideas in the scientific area generated within the last ten years, from institutes like Ramon y Cajal or Severo Ochoa. Furthermore, many talented Spanish people have spent time living abroad in countries like the US, UK, Germany, Sweden or Japan, where they have actually established their own schools or centers. Conversely, Spain has attracted people from all over the world to work and carry out research. Many of the key opinion leaders in the health area in Spain today chair the governing boards of a number of leading research institutes in the country as well, such as Valentin Fuster at the Institute for Cardiovascular Research. Spain has truly established a very solid and high amount of well-qualified research people in the medical and biotechnological areas. The CSIC has invested a great deal of capital in the bio and health areas as

well. Considering where Spain was in the beginning of the 80s, when the country was being assisted by the World Bank to develop technologies, we have come a long way. It may have taken a long time, but Spain is finally developing incredibly groundbreaking products and with stronger intellectual property protection. In some ways, Spain was becoming a new country again and was perceived as relatively young despite its rich history. Furthermore, today we also see many developments in Spain in other areas of the biotechnology sector, such as agricultural biotechnology, industrial biotechnology or food biotechnology.

Where does Spain stand today in terms of local biotech companies being good partners to big pharmaceutical companies?

It is growing little by little. In the past, Spain lacked the confidence to aggressively pursue these types of collaborations. Big pharmaceutical companies therefore preferred to establish agreements with more strategic areas like the US or the UK. The Spanish administration has invested lots of money in the health area, but for a long time many Spanish researchers did not know how to use that money to create strategic partnerships. They lacked the skills to negotiate regarding patent agreements at the time. It was difficult because we lacked the skills to negotiate at the time, regarding patent agreements. However, slowly but surely these multinationals are becoming more interested in Spain because of the country's strength in both basic and translational research. The potential that in-licensing and out-licensing for pharma companies holds is tremendous, and we are starting to see a reverse trend regarding the stigma that surround Spain. For example, last month Roche announced a strategic R&D partnership with local genomics company Oryzon, which is one of the biggest partnerships that Roche has created in biotechnology anywhere. Roche is engaging with two of Oryzon's twelve patents, and Oryzon is actively trying to license the other ten to other companies. We are seeing more and more of this kind of activity in Spain today. The recent BioSpain event had a phenomenal number of meetings scheduled, more than double from last time, and at least 10-12 agreements established, not just for licensing but also for services and development. BioLatam was also a great experience, resulting in more than 30 agreements being established.

ASEBIO is also extending its international outreach, as seen with collaborations like that of Invest in Bogotá for BioLatam. What is ASEBIO's general internationalization strategy?

Over 2012, a total of 41 companies, 32 percent more than in 2011, signed 76 international alliances, an increase of 58 percent. They primarily involved companies or institutions from other European countries and the US. The number of alliances by ASEBIO members has doubled in the last few years, from 40 in 2009 to 76 in 2012. ASEBIO has managed the ICEX plan for the internationalization of the sector for several years now. Over the last few years, this support scheme has helped more than 130 companies to participate in over 36 international actions. The main international activity is the export of products and services, followed by research alliances, 7th Framework Program and Licensing Out.

ASEBIO is present in the main congresses of biotechnology all over the world. We attended BioKorea two weeks ago and we are going to BIO Convention in San Diego in two weeks. We spread our presence to more than fifteen congresses during a year.

ASEBIO feels that the sector is excessively atomized and requires a process of mergers and acquisitions to make it more dynamic, creating a sector with enough volume and strength to attract the international sector. Every year around 50 new biotechnology companies are launched in Spain,

a sign of the high degree of entrepreneurship, but if the companies which are now a few years old do not join forces, the sector will remain unfocused.

A month ago Spain witnessed one of its biggest operations in its biotechnology sector, namely the agreement between Roche and Oryzon Genomics, licensing this big pharma player to commercialize two families of patents which Oryzon has created in its pioneering research work.

How do you perceive the balance between innovation and entrepreneurship in Spain?

Spain is a fairly entrepreneurial country in biotechnology. We have more companies in the sector than other Western European countries like Germany or France. Our challenge is not building companies; we are well advanced in that, and there are about 60 companies created per year. Our challenge is based on industry consolidation, driven by alliances and mergers to transform entrepreneurship into innovation.

What is your assessment of the future for Spain's growing biotechnology sector?

Spain's biotech sector has the support of ICEX, which helps tremendously with the internationalization of this sector. ASEBIO also takes part in helping to establish agreements with other companies around the world. The number of companies at this moment that are implementing relationships in the US, Europe and Japan is increasing every year. Almost 90 Spanish companies established foreign relationships in 2013 – everyone from Oryzon to Grifols. Furthermore, the government decided named 2014 as the Year of Biotechnology in Spain, as they have decided that biotech can be a strategic area of professional interest for the country, following a panel of experts in 2013 determining Spain's best opportunities for the future. This panel chose seven different areas to invest in, one of which was biotechnology.

Spain's capacity to develop personalized medicine is also unprecedented. The country's strength in the development of biomarkers is outstanding for the creation of an interesting and innovative healthcare system, particularly in the areas of hematology and oncology. Combined with Spain's program involving the public purchase of new technologies, the opportunities to improve clinical outcomes and reduce costs are endless. Considering there is really only one buyer of such technology in Spain, the public, we can really develop these purchases in-house for innovative technology, covered with government funds. Hospitals are employing entrepreneurship in their own unique work. ICEX is working on developing a law for internationalization, and ASEBIO is a part of this development. Between personalizing Spain's healthcare, internationalizing our economy, and selling or licensing our technology to develop medical tourism, we can offer many solutions not only to ourselves but to the world.

[See more interviews](#)
