

Julien Ettersperger – CEO, Medicen



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Julien Ettersperger, appointed in November 2023 as the first internal leader of Medicen, is steering the agency through a strategic transformation to establish Île-de-France as Europe's leading health innovation hub. Leveraging the region's dense research capacity, he champions stronger public-private collaboration to better convert scientific excellence into commercial impact.

To begin, could you provide an overview of Medicen's current mission and strategic direction, particularly given your appointment as the first internal leader and the organisation's recent strategic repositioning?

Medicen operates as a dedicated health innovation agency, functioning as a catalyst for healthcare advancement within the Île-de-France region. Following the disruptions of COVID-19 and the subsequent France 2030 strategic initiatives, we undertook a comprehensive strategic realignment to mark our twentieth anniversary, culminating in our roadmap to 2027, also aligning with major European priorities.

Our strategic framework rests upon three fundamental pillars. First, we serve as strategic advisors to both our ecosystem and government bodies, anticipating market trends and providing directional guidance. Second, we provide comprehensive support to innovators and entrepreneurs throughout their development journey, uniquely combining public and private funding mechanisms to accelerate

market entry. We have developed sophisticated acceleration programmes that prepare entrepreneurs for international competition. Third, we function as a connector across the innovation spectrum—linking academic institutions, industrial partners, and organisations of varying scales to foster collaborative innovation.

We define ourselves as a catalyst in the truest sense: our presence triggers reactions and movement among stakeholders within one of Europe's most concentrated research environments. The Île-de-France region houses 40-50 percent of France's academic research capacity and industrial development capabilities, creating an exceptionally dense innovation landscape that requires strategic navigation.

How would you assess the region's current competitive position in European healthcare innovation, and what progress has been made toward your goal of European leadership?

The assessment depends significantly on definitional frameworks. When aggregating comprehensive metrics, France already ranks first in Europe in numerous categories, though the United Kingdom maintains advantages in private investment flows. Within the Île-de-France specifically, we have established ourselves as a leading European health innovation region when benchmarked against comparable territories.

However, we recognise significant untapped potential. Whilst we possess an exceptional scientific and academic foundation, we face challenges in developing what we term "licorne" companies—unicorn-scale enterprises capable of competing globally. The disconnect between our research excellence and value creation through entrepreneurial ventures remains a strategic focus area.

This gap represents both our greatest challenge and our most significant opportunity. We must bridge the chasm between scientific discovery and commercial scalability to realise our full competitive potential.

What specific strengths and challenges do you observe in the region's innovation ecosystem?

Oncology exemplifies our regional excellence most clearly. The global ranking of institutions such as Gustave Roussy, Institut Curie, and Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris demonstrates world-class capabilities. Oncology comprises approximately half of all innovation projects we evaluate annually, reflecting both institutional strength and market focus.

However, translating this excellence into commercial success remains challenging. Whilst we observe strong research outcomes and promising mergers and acquisitions with major pharmaceutical companies, the number of established French oncology companies remains limited relative to our research capabilities.

The newly established Paris-Saclay Cancer Cluster addresses this challenge directly. This 100,000-square-metre facility at Villejuif, developed in collaboration with the Gustave Roussy Institute, represents a focused approach to transforming excellence into industrial success. This initiative, part of the broader France Health Innovation Plan, concentrates investment and expertise specifically within oncology to enhance global competitiveness.

What emerging trends and technological developments are shaping the region's innovation landscape?

Beyond our established oncology excellence, several dynamic areas are gaining momentum. Biotherapies and biologics represent a major focus under France 2030, leveraging our existing expertise to develop advanced therapeutic solutions. Surgical innovation is creating revolutionary approaches to patient care through robotics and augmented surgical capabilities, fundamentally transforming operational procedures whilst reducing risk profiles.

Digital health solutions co-created with healthcare institutions represent another area of significant development. We address the frequent disconnect between technological solutions and genuine medical needs through experimental partnerships with hospital systems, accelerating development cycles and ensuring clinical relevance.

Artificial intelligence pervades all these domains, from drug discovery to development acceleration. France maintains global leadership in AI research, exemplified by Google establishing their innovative laboratory in the Paris region. Our companies in what we now term 'TechBio' demonstrate particular strength in AI-driven drug discovery and development optimisation, representing a key thematic focus for our ecosystem's future.

These focus areas are also recognized as strategic areas under EU initiatives such as the European Innovation Council and as IPCEI Health (Important project of common European Interest), the latter mobilising 1.26 billion in public support. France is a key participant, with major companies from our Ile-de-France ecosystem such as Sanofi and Servier, actively involved. Supporting these areas not only strengthens our regional competitiveness but also ensures that our innovation landscape aligns with broader European ambitions for health sovereignty, technological leadership and market integration.

Could you share specific examples of how Medicen has contributed to successful innovation outcomes?

Moon Surgical exemplifies our co-creation approach effectively. This surgical robotics company, developing collaborative robots to assist surgeons, emerged from experimental partnerships between AP-HP and the founding team. We facilitated the initial proof-of-concept development, leading to significant investment from Sofinnova partners. The company now operates across multiple centres, including US facilities, and approaches market readiness.

This success demonstrates our methodology: combining academic excellence with industrial partnership, supported by public funding mechanisms, to accelerate innovation from concept to market. The process requires considerable patience—often spanning ten years from initial concept to commercial realisation—but yields transformative results.

We support approximately seventy innovation projects annually, developed by academic institutions and focused on industrial development. Witnessing these projects evolve into viable companies represents the most rewarding aspect of our mission.

How does Medicenâ€™s collaborative approach between public and private sectors function in practice?

Public-private collaboration represents our organisational DNA. Our governance structure reflects this philosophy, incorporating biotechnology companies, start-ups, industrial partners, academic institutions, research institutes, healthcare institutions, and local authorities. This diversity ensures our strategic direction remains aligned with all stakeholder interests.

We systematically include all stakeholder categories in our task forces and events, deliberately breaking down silos between sectors. A crucial aspect of our work involves establishing common definitions and temporal frameworks across different stakeholder groups, as the term â€œinnovationâ€• carries different meanings and timescales for various participants.

Our thematic focus areas, such as oncology and surgical innovation, benefit from this collaborative approach. We ensure developing innovations address genuine unmet medical needs whilst facilitating connections between complementary capabilities.

The funding structure exemplifies this integration. Projects like Moon Surgical benefit from hospital-based experimentation, regional funding support, and private investment coordination. Similarly, Owkinâ€™s initial use case with Gustave Roussy was supported by regional funding, demonstrating how public resources can catalyse private sector success.

Looking toward 2027, what are your primary strategic objectives for the region?

Our approach can be summarised as â€œsimplify and accelerate.â€• France already demonstrates European leadership across multiple metrics, yet we often underestimate our capabilities. It is time to assume leadership with clarity, particularly in areas where our excellence aligns with pressing European priorities such as strategic autonomy, digital transformation, and sustainable health systems.

Regional collaboration represents a key strategic focus. We have established networks with fellow bioclusters including Eurobiomed, Lyonbiopole, and Biovalley France, creating a collective membership exceeding 1,000 organisations. This scale enables enhanced attractiveness to major pharmaceutical companies and investment organisations.

Equally, European-level collaboration is central to our long-term positioning. As an active member within the Council of European BioRegions (currently in leadership role), we are connected to over 47 health and life science clusters representing 15,000 health and life sciences actors across the EU, of which 70 percent are start-ups and SMEs. CEBR enables structured dialogue with European policymakers, facilitates scale-ups and joint project development across the EU and strengthens the collective of regional ecosystems. Through this platform, we contribute to and benefit from major EU strategies.

France alone cannot compete with China or the US at the global scale, but through European strategic coordination, we can transform our regional assets into shared competitive advantage. European collaboration can establish true competitive advantage. Hence, positioning our ecosystem as a powerhouse of innovation with collaborative partnerships as well as a gateway and co-leader within Europeâ€™s health innovation architecture, is of strategic importance.

What would be your message to international partners considering investment or collaboration opportunities in the Île-de-France region?

Despite perceptions of complexity within the French ecosystem, we actively welcome international innovators, investors, and partners. Our mission includes simplifying navigation of this complexity and facilitating development, investment, and partnership opportunities.

Paris represents a unique environment for innovation development, combining exceptional scientific resources with strategic market access. We encourage international partners to engage with us directly, as we possess the expertise and networks necessary to transform complexity into competitive advantage.

The region's concentration of research capability, combined with our collaborative approach and strategic focus, creates unparalleled opportunities for international partners seeking to establish or expand their European presence. We stand ready to facilitate these connections and accelerate mutual success.

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