

Nobel Winner Urges Research Partnerships Against Diseases

By John Brosky

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PARIS - The Woman of the Year in France and **2008** Nobel Laureate in Medicine, Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, director of the Retroviral Infections Unit at the Institut Pasteur in Paris, grasped the podium at the **EuroBio** congress as if it were a life preserver.

Unaccustomed to being the object of paparazzi, she was more comfortable speaking to an audience of biological scientists and university students.

"Since I heard the announcement on Monday I have been struggling to grasp the significance of this Nobel Prize," she said, adding she was pleased it gave her the opportunity to express her views on the future of AIDS research.

Barré-Sinoussi and her colleague at the Pasteur Institute, Luc Montagnier, discovered the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), making the rapid cloning of the HIV-1 genome possible and leading to the development of methods to diagnose infected patients and to screen blood products, limiting the spread of the pandemic.

They share the **2008** Nobel prize for medicine with Harald zur Hausen from the German Cancer Research Centre in Heidelberg for his discovery that the oncogenic human papilloma virus (HPV) caused cervical cancer, the second most common cancer among women.

"I am convinced that what we will learn in HIV will aid us in many other areas of research," Barré-Sinoussi said.

"Today we treat, but we do not have a cure for AIDS. And this is not the only disease for which we have not yet developed a vaccine," she said.

Referring to the presentation by Anne-Lise Borresen from the European Association of Cancer Research that was interrupted by her entrance into the conference center, Barré-Sinoussi said the convergence of epidemiology, basic science and clinical research necessary for translational medicine points the way forward.

She also said the partnership of public institutions and private interests, especially industry, are vital for future discoveries and that she regretted such partnerships are "too weak here in France."

AIDS research provides an example of how a rapid mobilization of resources and a reactivity by the pharmaceutical industry, which she credits with being involved since the beginning, can form an effective and innovative response to public health problems.

EuroBio provided evidence of the depth of bench strength in France for biomedical research and a robust-and-ready base of entrepreneurs. But that show of strength was on a grassroots level with small to micro-sized businesses assembled in clusters from seemingly every region of the country with a lone big pharma representative placed squarely in the center, the national champion, Sanofi-Aventis Group.

Philippe Pouletty, managing director of Truffle Capital in Paris, said Sanofi has now found religion in biotechnology and could be expected to become "a new champion of alliances."

Reports from two industry associations this week at **EuroBio** lent support to the commentary of Nobel laureate Barré-Sinoussi regarding the weak government support as France Biotech called for changes to legislation and tax laws.

The director of the country's biotech group called those laws "stupid" while the French Pharmaceutical Association urged the government to make good on its pledge to allocate 25 percent of this year's research budget for biotechnology and medical programs.

Back at the grassroots level, several regional bioclusters of France joined to collectively win €300 million (US\$408.13 million) in funding at the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Employment to formally recognize the increasing interaction and networking between them.

The newly formed Life Science Corridor France, announced at **EuroBio**, stretches the idea of clustering to the breaking point as it joins the Alsace BioValley to the Cancer-Bio-Sante cluster in Toulouse and includes the Lyon BioPole located at the midpoint in the corridor.

It is exactly like proclaiming a Pennsylvania corridor by joining Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and picking up Scranton on the way. The objective is to put a single face on the 1,200 companies in the corridor for international partnerships.

The three partners each bring an international program into the Life Science Corridor: Alsace with the Centre Québec de Valorisation des BioSciences; Lyon with the Massachusetts Office of International Trade & Investment and the Massachusetts Technology Transfer Center; and Toulouse with the Kansai Bio Promotion Council in Kobé/Osaka, Japan.

Alsace BioValley features one of Europe's highest densities of the Life Science industry and counts 12 academic centers, and two prestigious research institutes, INSERM, the national institute for health and medical research, and CNRS, the national center for scientific research.

Sanofi signed on Sept. 26 a collaboration agreement with the Strasbourg-based affiliate of RainDance Technologies Inc. from Lexington, Mass., and the Louis Pasteur University to launch a project called dScreen within the Alsace BioValley cluster using the American company's microfluidics technology.

There are "very, very strong incentives" for foreign companies to locate in the region, according to the head of the cluster management group, Nicolas Carboni.

Earlier in September he said GE Healthcare agreed to set up a molecular imaging platform in Alsace. The Lyon BioPôle has pulled together more than €30 million in national, regional and European Commission funding over the past three years to gather strengths in what is already France's most muscular region for life sciences.

With bioMérieux and Sanofi-Pasteur located in a regional cluster that stretches to Grenoble, the focus for activities in infectious diseases and diagnostics was a clear choice. The link with Massachusetts for matching projects with U.S. biotechs was reinforced when bioMérieux recently set up a commercial office for Lyon BioPôle in its bioTheranostics offices in Cambridge.

The continuum of diagnostics and treatment of cancer is the focus for the Toulouse biocluster, which currently is constructing a €1 billion, 500-acre campus that will include a university hospital outpatient clinic, new laboratories for Pierre Fabre Pharmaceuticals and a new research facility for Sanofi-Aventis along with the offices and clinical labs in an incubator for start-up biotechs.

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