

# Renaissance Man

Eric Poincelet is committed to his vision of mobilising European biotech into an industry that can rival the US. *Pharm Exec Europe* caught up with him to find out how he is engineering the ever-strengthening EuroBio event to help facilitate this.



As the exhibition floor of this year's BIO 2008 International Convention in San Diego was being cleared, and as its 20000-plus attendees were making their way back to their homes and offices across the globe, Eric Poincelet, commissioner general of EuroBio, was immersing himself, some 9000 kilometres away, in the preparations for what he hopes will one day

be a true rival to this mammoth US event.

Poincelet's plans for EuroBio are as ambitious and far-reaching as those that propelled US BIO to its current of world domination.

There is a long way to go, of course, not least because the European industry has a lot of catching up to do before it can claim any kind of parity with the US. However, Poincelet is quick to point out that European biotech is simply 10 years *after* the US, and not 10 years *behind*.

EuroBio began life back in 1997 when the French government initiated a European biotechnology networking event known as European Biotech Crossroads. This was, however, according to Poincelet, a "very French" type of event. Industry was not much involved; rather, it aimed to assist the new generation of researchers "to find a job and discuss the biotech sector."

At this point Poincelet was appointed by Raymond Barre, the former prime minister of France (1976–81) to help launch what became BioVision, the World Life Sciences Forum. Although industry was involved with this, Poincelet was nonetheless frustrated as it was still very much 'society-oriented.' "I could see the US Bio event developing at that time," he says, "and I realised that we needed a meeting for the life sciences industry here in Europe, but nobody was doing it. We had partnering events, financial seminars, conferences here and there, but nothing like the US BIO convention."

When Poincelet left BioVision he was approached by the French Ministry of Research to broaden the scope of the European Biotech Crossroads. He started in 2005 by renaming it EuroBio. "I repositioned it at the interface of industry and research, with industry first; and I basically tried to copy the US event, using everything that I thought worked and discarding what I thought didn't work."

Poincelet and his team implemented BIO's four-pillar structure — the conference, the partnering event, a careers fair and, of course, the exhibition. By 2006, EuroBio was being attended by over 4000 people; this year's event, in Paris on 7–9 October, is expected to attract over 5000.

But for all its 'internationalisation,' there is a provocative engagement this year with some of the more controversial issues surrounding biotech in Europe, an approach that smacks, admirably, of a particularly French mentality. "We will be asking questions such as why have we spent so much money, for instance, on the common agricultural policy (CGA) during the past so-many years and why so little on the development of research and innovation," says Poincelet. "This a strong statement, but it shouldn't be seen as a provocation. It should be seen as a way of thinking about the future. Every European citizen is spending around €100 per year on growing sugar beet or whatever's in the framework of the CGA, and only €14 on research and innovation, which is what should be shaping the 21st Century. We're not saying that we should reduce the money spent on the Common Agricultural Policy — we're suggesting that maybe there should be a Common Research Policy!"

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## Nationalism and internationalism

Despite the growing success of his event, Poincelet is acutely aware of the ongoing disparity between US and European biotech. Indeed, the disparity *within* Europe — between the UK and the rest of the continent — is a also significant one: the UK industry constitutes 40% of the European biotech industry. It comes as no surprise, then, that the presentations at this year's EurBio are in English, despite the show being tagged 'the life sciences event of the European

Union presidency' (that is, France). But the stronger UK infrastructure has yet to lend its support to the European industry, according to Poincelet. "Nearly ten years ago, I was dealing with UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) and I had the feeling they were playing very bi-laterally between the US and the UK but ignoring the rest of the Continent. This attitude may have changed since then of course. But I remember saying to a senior official of UKTI at the time that the UK should remember the African saying: 'When you kill your friend to feed the lion, you become the lion's next meal.' If you go

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below the critical mass that makes the biotech sector in Europe big enough to be attractive, then you will disappear."

Ten years later, Poincelet believes this is exactly what's happening. Europe has not yet achieved the critical mass it needs. "We have to make the politicians understand that if we don't take this seriously then tourism will be our premier industry in the future."

He says of his UK experience that he was surprised to see that the London stock exchange was not putting any priority on the European life sciences industry. Instead there were priorities on Canada, China and Russia. So "what we've done with EuroBio, is make sure that the New York Stock Exchange, together with

Euronext, really puts life sciences high on their list of priorities," he adds. "We're putting together a pipeline between the US and Europe so that the financing comes from the US, because we're not getting it from Europe."

Faced with these ongoing funding and support difficulties, we have to ask if Europe will remain too fractured to work as one, each country too preoccupied with its own nationalistic concerns to pull together in the interests of a truly European biotech force? Certainly, this is a theme the October event is prepared to tackle head-on — one of its debates is entitled 'Nationalism is the greatest enemy of biotechnology in Europe.' Poincelet himself sees Europe divided into two 'camps:' the Anglo-Saxon members and the Latin members. "The big split," he says, "is between those two worlds. However, through the events like EuroBio, they can start to realise that if they're not united then it won't work. United we stand, divided we fall."

### **A biotech renaissance?**

Poincelet sees hope, however, in the growing buoyancy of the developing biocluster regions, particularly in the Latin south. The Bioclusters in Milan and Barcelona, he says, are making great strides in the industry. "They have realised how important the health and eco-industry sectors are, and they are really putting themselves together to become the best in Europe and the best outside Europe."

Perhaps, then, EuroBio's job could be a simpler one, one of fusing the "three categories of European cluster" successfully together. These are the big, country-specific clusters (or megaclusters); the smaller but cross-border 'metaclusters,' such as ScanBalt; and the niche clusters, focusing, for example, on green biotech. The bioclusters are "a very healthy thing," says Poincelet, "because what happened in the US ten years ago is taking place here now. In the US now you have maybe nine leading clusters; in Europe you have 12–14 big clusters."

In order to mobilise this potential European strength, to solidify the united front we need to size up to the US, Poincelet believes we need to take inspiration from history. "The wealthiest time in Europe was during the Renaissance period, when the cities were working together as part of metaclusters. Venice worked with Vienna; Milan with Warsaw. The boundaries were not between countries but between clusters, and this is what could happen with biotechnology in Europe."

This indeed could be our greatest hope for the development of a truly great European biotech industry, so we have to be thankful that Eric Poincelet his team at EuroBio remain tirelessly committed to making it happen.

### **ERIC POINCELET: CAREER IN BRIEF**

**EuroBio's commissioner general Eric Poincelet previously served as director general at The World Life Sciences Forum BioVision, launched in 1998. At the same time he was CEO of BioSquare SAS, which he founded in 2001 to develop at the request of the European Commission a partnering event at the interface of biotechs, large corporations, finance and research institutions.**

**Eric's previous experience includes tenure as COO for Edap Technomed Inc. in Boston and marketing manager of Nuclear Medicine at Philips Medical Systems' Headquarters in The Netherlands. Eric is a graduate of Paris VI University (Jussieu), and holds a post-graduate degree in Engineering/Fine Chemistry, and an MBA from ESSEC in Paris.**