Interview: Jean–Louis Roule – CEO, CIDP, Mauritius



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Centre International de Développement Pharmaceutique (CIDP) has pioneered cosmetic and pharmaceutical Research & Development in Mauritius, and is Mauritius' flagship success story in the sector. Founded over 10 years ago, CIDP is an international CRO (Contract Research Organisation).



As an entrepreneur and a pioneer, which opportunities did you see in Mauritius that you felt you could capitalize on?

When I arrived in Mauritius in 2001, with a background in pharmaceuticals, I wondered what I was going to do since the industry was not very developed. But taking a closer look, Mauritius did offer a unique set of advantages that the country, and CIDP, could capitalize on.

The benefits of the country come firstly from its multi-ethnic population, and secondly from its proximity to Africa and Asia, two continents which hold a lot of promise. Mauritius is located in a strategic position, on the old trade routes of the Indies, a trade route which has recently been

revitalized. Finally, the political and economic stability of the country and the time difference works in our favor.

In addition, the fact that it is situated in the southern hemisphere was particularly important as it allowed us to develop a whole line of research in photobiology and conduct studies on tanning, melanoma and cancer.

What Mauritius and CIDP had to offer really appealed to dermocosmetic laboratories and this led to the initiation of our research facilities in 2004: by first catering to the needs of the cosmetic industry.

Since the establishment of CIDP in 2004 you have succeeded in extending the reach of the CRO to other parts of the world. Could you please tell us about the company's geographical expansion strategy?

When we founded the company in 2004, there were just four of us working in a rented clinical facility. But as the company began to grow very rapidly in Mauritius, it soon became clear that Mauritius and its population of 1.2 million was not enough for us to answer to our research needs. Since then, we have expanded to new locations.

In 2010, we incorporated our first subsidiary in Bucharest, Romania which gave us access to a wider population of Caucasians, as, ultimately, they only represent around 2 to 3% of the population here in Mauritius. Today, in Romania our facilities cover a whole building of approximately 1000m² where the core activity of research is photobiology.

We then chose to open our second subsidiary in India, due to its proximity to Mauritius, its wide prevalence of skin pathologies and, above all, India is a country with good opportunities for growth given the sheer size of the population. Like all our subsidiaries, CIDP India is 100% owned by CIDP which means that we adhere to the strictest European standards.

Two years later, at the request of our clients, and because our expertise allowed us to do so, we also expanded to Brazil which is the second largest producer of cosmetics in the world and one of the main consumers. It was important for us to have a presence in South America which, like India, holds a lot of promise economically.

We also set up a small regulatory affairs unit in Paris which offers the necessary compliance services for obtaining marketing authorization. Being in Paris allows us to be close to some of the largest pharmaceutical and cosmetic hubs.

In October 2015, we opened a new subsidiary in Biopolis, the research hub of Singapore, which gives us access to the Asian market. Considering the increasing economic importance of Asia, it was obviously necessary for CIDP to be present in that market.

Our next step will be to open a subsidiary in the USA because of the proximity to the pharmaceutical industry and the market. Once we've achieved that, we will be able to say with pride that we have a foot on every continent!

CIDP has not only expanded geographically, but also developed into new sectors, and new clusters of activities. Today, what is the breadth of your services?

We started our activity specializing in the cosmetics sector because back then, there was no legal framework for pharmaceutical clinical trials in Mauritius. After years of discussion with the government, the Clinical Trial Bill was approved and implemented in 2011, allowing us to conduct pharmaceutical clinical trials which comply with international regulations, and allowing Mauritius to play an important role in the international quest for therapeutic innovation. Therefore, our goal was to further develop our pharma clinical studies here in Mauritius.

We have started working with the biggest pharmaceutical groups to conduct their clinical trials in phase II and III. One of our main focuses for the pharmaceutical segment at the moment is diabetes studies, as unfortunately, the prevalence of diabetes in Mauritius is around 25%. We also work on other major therapeutic areas, namely cardiovascular, respiratory, dermatology, Hepatitis C and HIV.

As the first CRO to be set up in Mauritius, we are very well positioned and have the advantage of a strong understanding of the island's political, economic and medical make-up. We know the regulatory processes inside out, we know the industrial framework, we have the best network of investigators, and our quality is paramount and homogenous across all of our subsidiaries. We have launched multi-center studies and have developed our activities in clusters. Today we offer preclinical and clinical research for safety and efficacy studies for both the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industry as well as regulatory affairs services, biostats and data management services.

The second pillar of our activity is a direct result of our collaboration with Her Excellency Ameenah Gurib Fakim, the current president of Mauritius, and one of the most gifted scientists of her generation. Her knowledge of African pharmacopeia is impressive, and this is a field waiting to be fully explored.

Together, in 2009, we launched a small extraction laboratory with the objective of creating a collection of plants along with their profile. Today, this laboratory is called CIDP Research & Innovation, and has doubled in size with a capacity of 1,200 extracts per year. The first tasks involve collecting, identifying, extracting and analyzing the characteristics of the plant. As such, our work is of great interest to the pharmaceutical, cosmetic and nutraceutical industries looking for innovation. What we offer here is true innovation.

We are planning to open a new facility for galenic formulation so that once we have identified a molecule of interest we will be able to make it into a cream, syrup or tablet.

By doing so, we plan to offer a complete service to our clients. What is truly remarkable about our growth is that in a short period of time, we have become a full service CRO. Our ambition is to be the leading CRO in Africa and the Indian Ocean.

In order to achieve this, we are fortunate enough to be able to count on the support of our shareholders, in particular GML Life. GML Life understood the strategy, and immediately said yes to our ambitions. This was a risky challenge, since amongst those who know it all, Mauritius is primarily known as a tourism destination. So to be recognized and competitive in this industry, we needed to prove that we could deliver better quality than what was already out there.

We succeeded in this challenge, and today we work with the leading companies of our industry.

The consolidation of outsourcing to a few large CROs is becoming more common in the industry. What are CIDP's competitive advantages in this area?

In comparison to larger CROs, the size of CIDP allows us to be more reactive. We have a greater capacity to anticipate, recruit, and coordinate, and we capitalize on that to offer more timely solutions to the pharmaceutical industry. We can also be a site management center; help with site selection, manage the submissions, hold meetings on a daily basis, and select eligible investigators.

The concept of "time is money" is fundamental in this industry. The three keys to our service are quality, reactivity and price. Nowadays, clients require tasks to be carried out very quickly so that they can meet their expedited time lines. As a result of our reactivity and the infrastructure we already have in place, we have managed to reduce the time to commercialization. We have understood that this is the top priority of the pharma and cosmetic sectors, and that is what we deliver.

What are the main projects which CIDP will be developing over the next few years?

Firstly, given the importance of responsiveness and reaction speed for our clients, we will soon expand to the US because of the proximity to the pharmaceutical industry and the market.

After this, our main focus will be on getting GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices) accreditation for our manufacturing unit, as well as GLP (Good Laboratory Practices) accreditation – making us the only CRO in the Indian Ocean with this accreditation.

We also plan to develop training and education because I believe that beyond our responsibility to our clients we also have an ethical and social role to play for the country. Through our research and innovation cluster, we have identified plants that could be cultivated, so we are now in the process of educating farmers on good practice.

In addition, I hope that the research we are carrying out will help to attract and retain the great minds back to Mauritius. We need to give the people here the chance to succeed in their own country.

You were also the man behind the development of the Biopark Mauritius. Could you please tell us about the goals behind this initiative?

The idea behind the Biopark was to create a hub which had all the skills and knowledge for the health and agriculture sectors concentrated in one place, to encourage people to work together and emulate each other. One of the main challenges we are still facing is communicating the strategy behind the Biopark – and the industry's contribution to the island's economy – to the people of Mauritius. I believe the authorities are already aware of this but we need to continue promoting Mauritius and changing the international image of our country.

When we started CIDP, we were confronted to the challenge of Mauritius' low profile outside of its traditional sectors: textile and tourism. In a lot of presentations, I could see people smile and think – do people really work in Mauritius? The goal which we set ourselves, with Her Excellency Ameenah Gurib Fakim, is to promote Mauritius as a research destination. Salim Ismail, the Chairman and CEO of Socota Group, the promoter of the BioPark, has also been active in this area. It's been hard, but we can see a new image of Mauritius starting to emerge: not just a vacation stop, but an intelligent island.

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