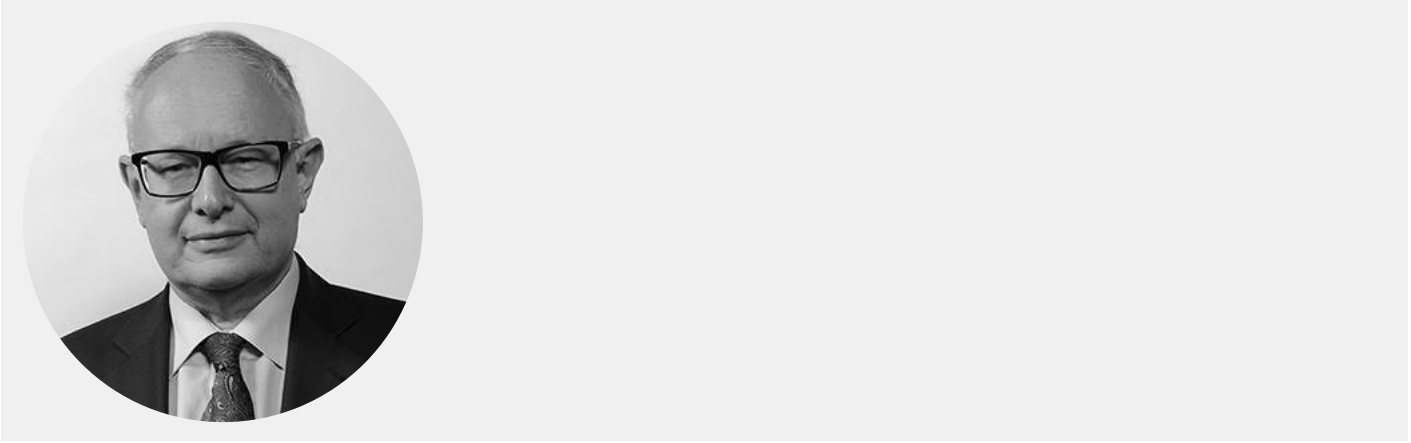
# Interview: Alain Bertheas – President, Sigvaris France



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*The presence in France of Swiss medical compression garment manufacturer Sigvaris dates back more than 100 years. The current president, Alain Bertheas, describes the company's history and explains its garments.*

**You came to Sigvaris in 1980, and have remained in the company ever since. What have been some of the organisation's major milestones?**

I joined the company in 1980, when my father Michel was still running the business. One year later, we decided to work in partnership with our competitor Ganzoni and Co, which was based in Alsace as the subsidiary of a Swiss company. My father was a creative engineer, while Ganzoni was focused more on customers and sales. Therefore the merge of these two people was an interesting and complementary reality and the beginning of the real success story.

In 1985, we decided to build a new plant, and I was placed in charge of it. I was given a budget of 12 million Francs, and we constructed a plant with 2,000 square meters of space; today we have more than 12,000 square meters here in Saint-Just. In Alsace, Ganzoni had been present since 1924. In 1991 we bought a big client, after which we created a specific French holding in order to prepare the merger and have a single, executive organization. Before the merge we had experienced positive activity in the French market, and the actual merge with Sigvaris took place in 1996. At this time, I became president of Sigvaris France and have remained in this position ever since.

**Was it challenging to integrate the technology and know-how of each company into one?**

Actually, it was not so difficult because we had already been working together for more than 15 years. Thus it was a very good time to prepare for a different culture. You have to account for the reality of the history of both companies with such mergers. This is primarily made by the people working in it. Both companies had similar cultures, with people working very hard to focus on quality for the customers. By this I do not simply mean quality of technical requirements; we were focused in both companies on the reality that medical compression stockings would be worn by people all day long and that therefore comfort and medical efficiency would be paramount. This was our principal aim. Employees in both companies were quite close together in terms of personal culture and values. The merger aimed to develop the company rather than reduce it, which was demonstrated by our increased workforce.

**How important is the French operation in relation to the entire Sigvaris organization?**

This is indeed an important subsidiary in terms of activity, experience and competencies. Our aim is to be able to dissipate these experiences to the group. It is important to integrate this French experience and development in order to contribute to the development of the world group. When I discuss with the different general managers of the company around the world, the focus is always on expanding and using the different experiences worldwide in order to be more complementary and find solutions to the different issues found around the globe.

**Sigvaris offers compression garments for venous disease treatment, wellness and sports activity. How do these stockings work, and what medical benefit do they provide?**

Pain in the legs can be linked to an irregular blood flow, also known as venous insufficiency. These garments cure veins by restoring blood flow. If the flow is insufficient, blood tends to stay in the veins, creating an unhealthy and painful expansion. The pressure of our garments reduces this expansion, creating the mechanical properties to restore blood flow. As such, we contribute to the well-being of patients.

**Are you able to customize these stockings, or is it more a matter of one-size-fits-all?**

Indeed, having the right size is important. We exert pressure on the leg. Our products contain an elastic yarn, which when stretched creates a force that is equal to the force required to maintain it. This force on the leg exerts pressure, and requires a very precise stretch; consequently we must

know the exact size of the leg on which we want to apply the product to exert the right pressure. Those who distribute the product must take the right measurements to deliver the right size. This is why we offer many different sizes. Furthermore, as this is a medical treatment, in order to have high compliance we offer different colors. Our aim is to propose to the consumer different structures of product with different materials, such as cotton, linen or bamboo. We also have specific models for men and women. This is a real medical product although it looks normal, which is important from a psychological perspective. For example, a young woman after maternity might have to wear such a product, so it is important that these stockings are aesthetically pleasing.

**Who tends to require these products the most?**

50 percent of all women have the potential to suffer from venous insufficiency, and 25 of men, although that could change over time with the advent of poorer eating habits. Venous inefficiency is a huge health problem, and medical compression stockings are the best way to treat venous insufficiency. It is a completely natural solution, allowing the patient to forego drugs.

**Does Sigvaris sell these garments “over-the-counter”, or are they prescribed specifically by doctors?**

In Europe, these products are primarily prescribed by doctors. In the US and South America, prescriptions are starting to pick up on a more regular basis. In Asia consumers tend to order online, but this risks accidentally ordering the wrong size or measurements. As this is a medical treatment, you must adapt the pressure to the right level of venous insufficiency perfectly, which is normally done by a doctor. We do sell support stockings, but medical stockings are better prescribed and distributed by a health professional. Perhaps in the future, digital measurements could be easy to organize, but for the moment it is slightly costly.

**Sigvaris is the global leader for medical compression garments; how much is the medical community aware of these as an alternative to pharmaceuticals, and how do you communicate their availability?**

It is only a question of time and organization. We need to organize dialogue with physicians and organize meetings with doctors to explain; furthermore we must have scientific surveys that demonstrate that these stockings function well. Compression is an historic technology; today we simply organize how to produce a very good product that is wearable, medically efficient, comfortable all day long, and aesthetically pleasing. To treat venous insufficiency, we need to obtain compliance from the people. If you have an ugly product or one that is difficult to wear, patients will not be interested. Most importantly, we need to work with physicians as the product’s

aim regarding the physicians' needs is to treat patients. With the technology we must be able to answer to consumer needs for both men and women.

**Your grandfather started this company and has undergone many evolutions since that time. As the third generation of Sigvaris, what kind of legacy do you want to leave behind?**

This company will continue as a success story. Within the Sigvaris group, we have been able to develop a strong, efficient and competent structure. My aim is to sustain this for the future. When I leave, I will be at the end of my professional career; I want to leave it with great potential for those who take the lead to continue developing the company. Medical compression stockings are our core business, but our complementary activities will remain important in the future as well. For the moment we are working on venous insufficiency and developing compression stockings or therapy in other kinds of activities such as sport and well-being. We also work with physicians and health organizations. We work in close partnerships with universities and hospitals to create trials to perfectly identify all medical realities and evaluations of different treatments. We must develop on the base of these competencies slightly before venous insufficiency in terms of well-being and be able to be part of the life of the people who simply need a product to help them. Our possibilities for the future are endless.

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