Interview: Marc Vandelaer – CEO, IBBL (Integrated BioBank of Luxembourg)



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CEO Marc Vandelaer reveals why the Luxembourg biobank IBBL is more than a traditional biobank and how, despite the short time since its inception in 2010, it has begun to receive recognition as a leader within the biobanking industry and a valued bioservice provider.

IBBL (Integrated BioBank of Luxembourg) has been described as 'more than a traditional biobank' – with that in mind, could you please introduce IBBL?

Many biobanks do not simply store biological samples. They also take care of the collection and processing of these samples, by, for example extracting white blood cells or DNA. Very few biobanks also carry out detailed analysis and quality control on the samples, to support their clients' needs. IBBL is one of them. As an integrated research infrastructure, we provide all of these bioservices: collection, processing, analysis and storage of biological samples and associated data.

By combining these services and focusing on quality, IBBL is able to offer a complete package to researchers from industry or academia that are running clinical trials, multi-center research projects, or validation studies. Our commitment to quality is reflected in the fact that IBBL is ISO 9001 and NF S96-900 certified and, on top of that, one of only a handful of biobanks in the world to be accredited according to ISO 17025, the norm that specifies the general requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories.

Our main differentiating factor is that on top of being an operational biobank, we also carry out our own internal biospecimen research. It allows us to optimize, validate and standardize the way these samples are handled from collection to redistribution. This benefits not only our clients, who can rest assured that the samples and services we provide are of consistent and the highest possible quality. It also benefits the biobanking and biomedical research community as a whole, because we publish our results, offer training and proficiency testing and help elaborate new international guidelines and norms. As such, IBBL is being increasingly recognized as a leader or reference institution within the biobanking industry.

[Featured_in]

This is quite amazing, because IBBL only began operations in 2010 – how did you build this position of recognition and leadership so quickly?

The key factor in this rapid growth was the set-up at the beginning, both in terms of staff and in terms of focus areas. We brought in several well-known experts from abroad to build IBBL up. Importantly, the 10 to 20 years of experience that each of these people bring, cover different aspects that are crucial in biobanking, including operations, research and quality. The excellent reputation and international recognition of these experts has further helped us get to the position we are in today. For instance, our Chief Scientific Officer, Dr Fay Betsou, was the president of the main international society for biobanks, ISBER (International Society for Biological and Environmental Repositories). She was also one of the pioneers of biospecimen quality control. Thanks to these experts, we recognized the importance of biospecimen research and its link to biobank quality very early on. So, we focused on that since the get-go and continued developing our research and our quality management system as our activities have grown.

What types of entities do you provide biobanking services to and what is the mix?

We work with a fairly comprehensive variety of clients from industry, academia and EU research consortia. For instance, we have been subcontracted by an American CRO to handle the European arms of their clinical trials. We receive blood samples from virtually every major city in Europe from London to St Petersburg and Istanbul. We then manually extract the PBMCs according to the client’s specifications, check cell counts and viability, cryopreserve the cells and shipped them overseas to the client. We also work with several multinational life-science companies on product development, by testing and validating the new systems, workflows and equipment that they are developing; the hard- and software that will form the biobanking infrastructure of the future.

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Besides these industrial partners, the academic and public research sector is proving to be a major focus for IBBL. Often, academic researchers do not have the time and resources to truly optimize the way they handle their samples. Understandably, they are eager to just get on with their research. On top of that, many worry about the quality control of their samples, but are not sure how to approach this issue. That is why more and more academic researchers entrust the handling of their samples to IBBL.

Finally, we also work with several EU research consortia and pan-European organizations. The most recent example is the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC), with which we have been working for some time now. EORTC has come to view IBBL as a reliable, quality-oriented and capable partner, which is why they have now officially made us their partner of choice for the management and storage of biosamples in the context of their clinical research.

We hope to secure more clients of this type and, to that end, we pushed strongly for Luxembourg to join EATRIS, the European infrastructure for translational medicine. This has now happened, and IBBL is the national coordinating institution for EATRIS in Luxembourg. As EATRIS's role is to gather expertise and facilitate access to professional high quality bioservices, we expect our membership in EATRIS to increase our visibility, give us access to a wider market and ultimately help us grow our customer base.

Would you say that IBBL has reached the point where it is starting to transition from start-up to a large, established operation?

Absolutely. In the last several months, we have really seen a step up in the scale of projects that we are being considered for and have already made the short list for two very large projects. This has most likely been prompted by the fact that we have reached a level of maturity where we have the capabilities and track-record needed to handle these sorts of projects.

To support this transition, we will need substantially more space than we currently have, which is why, in 2017, we will move into a new facility, currently under construction, in the south of Luxembourg that it will have 2.5 times the floor space we have currently and that is designed to fit our specific needs as a biobank and bioservice provider.

A few words to conclude?

Yes, we have accomplished a lot in a short time span and gained significant international recognition. But, we will not rest on our laurels. Since we will soon be able to scale up our operations, we look forward to managing more and larger contracts. At the same time, we will continue to focus on quality and customer satisfaction to nurture current partnerships and develop

new ones.

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