Interview: Eric Delarge – General Manager & Representative Director, Servier Japan



"Despite Japan's efforts to improve translational research and bring academia closer to the industry, bioIPSeeds actually perfectly embodies the kind of pioneering tool that could benefit Japanese researchers."

18.05.2017

Tags: Japan, Servier, Blockchain, Pharma, Biotech, Healthcare, Digitalization, BioIPSeeds

Eric Delarge, general manager and representative director of Servier Japan, recently became the first member of the international pharma industry to join bioIPSeeds, an innovative tool aiming to foster early stage collaboration between academia and the global industry, which also stands as the first application of the blockchain technology in the pharmaceutical and healthcare fields. In this regard, he provides insights into the main hurdles he usually faces as part of his scouting and screening activities across the region, as well as his expectations regarding the heightened collaboration potential that a blockchain-based platform such as bioIPSeeds could offer.

As general manager and representative director of Servier Japan, why is industry-academia collaboration important to you?

I have been working in the pharmaceutical industry for more than twenty years and most of my professional expertise relates to Asia. Prior to joining Servier, I spent half of my career at Belgium's UCB, where I was notably entrusted with the mission to set up and develop the Japanese affiliate of the company in the early 1990s. In 2002, I moved from Japan to China, where I oversaw the implementation of UCB's strategy in this major market for over a year. I then joined Servier in 2003, first as Paris-based Regional Operations Manager for Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – before moving back to Japan in 2007 to become Servier's general manager in the country.

There are very few countries in the world that hold the scientific expertise to develop new chemical entities (NCEs), new treatments, or new therapeutic approaches. Beside the US and some European countries, Japan however fully belongs to this category. In the meantime, countries like Taiwan and Korea have been rapidly catching up while China has also been gaining momentum on the R&D side.

Given Japan's sheer R&D capacity, my responsibilities at the helm of the Japanese affiliate also encompass the screening and sourcing of NCEs, innovative therapeutic approaches and treatments that could reveal themselves as potentially groundbreaking products, both at the local and international levels. At first, I concentrated my screening efforts on Japan; nevertheless, as from 2016, we started broadening the scope of our research to now include Korea and Taiwan as our targeted R&D ecosystems.

How does bioIPSeeds, a platform fostering global open innovation, fit within this objective?

When it comes to screening activities, Servier usually follows a two-fold approach. On one hand, experts with high-level scientific backgrounds are concentrating their efforts on projects at the basic research and academia levels. For general manager like myself, our mission usually revolves around looking for more mature opportunities that have already entered the clinical development stage or that are on the market – following the successful example set up with LONSURF, as, in June 2015, Servier entered into an exclusive license agreement with Taiho Pharmaceutical for the co-development and commercialization of this Metastatic Colorectal Cancer product in Europe.

Nevertheless, I have spent more than twenty-five years of my career in Japan; this experience provides me with a great understanding of the local innovation-driven ecosystem, while prompting me to consider that untapped development potential still "sleeps" on the shelves of local or regional R&D centers. As a result, I have also been entrusted with the responsibility to look at how we could more significantly leverage these untapped collaboration opportunities – including at the academic level. The same goes for Taiwan: although dedicated resources may soon handle the scouting of promising opportunities that this country' universities and companies may have to offer, we so far coordinate all these exploratory activities from Japan – which explains my interest in bioIP*Seeds [which so far only gathers IP seeds from Taiwanese researchers, e.d.]*

[Featured_in]

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researchers. In this regard, I deeply hope that bioIPSeeds, which so far only gathers Taiwanese R&D centers and researchers, will further expand into the region to include Japanese IP seeds and scientists – and I have no doubt that Japan-based research and incubation centers would be particularly interested in accessing such tool to promote their in-house developed innovations.

In the grand scheme of things, BioIPSeeds aims to foster IP transfer and collaboration between researchers and the global industry. As part of your screening activities, what are the main hurdles you face when trying to access local and regional early stage projects?

In this part of the world, when it comes to academia-industry collaboration at the very early stage of the project development, one of my main issues relate to the diversity of languages, ranging from Korean to Chinese and Japanese. Historically, the most advanced research projects are always published in leading English-speaking publications; nevertheless, a large share of the information relating to early stage products is only written in local languages, meaning they are not accessible to potential international partners. In this regard, a tool such as bioIPSeeds, which aims to gather – in English – early phase projects and critical information on the same platform would allow to provide these IP seeds with a substantially heightened visibility. Furthermore, as online platform, it would be accessible in all countries in the world, making it even more interesting for international companies like Servier.

In the meantime, most articles published in top-notch publications are now mostly focused on the most frontier biological pathways or in vivo factors, while we increasingly struggle to find information about R&D projects focused on the isolation and identification of new compounds. In this regard, screening very early phase projects though literature reviews has become extremely time-consuming, strengthening the need for a collaboration-oriented platform that is exclusively designed for emerging projects that are not yet IP protected.

The most distinctive feature of bioIPSeeds is that it stands as the first blockchain-based platform to be used in the life sciences and healthcare industries. How does this technical specificity make a difference vis-à-vis other existing tools?

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By leveraging the heightened security generated by the P2P network of the blockchain technology, BioIPSeeds could greatly bolster information exchange for products that are not yet IP protected. This actually makes a crucial difference with other, existing tools and collaborative platforms.

We expect that its enhanced security and privacy will be critical to build trust on both sides, while encouraging more researchers to publish their most recent projects on the platform. Furthermore, as part of bioIPSeeds' peer-to-peer (P2P) structure, researchers will be empowered to upload by themselves their most recent IP seeds. As a result, the industry will be able to access information and data that are regularly updated – directly by the researchers.

Overall, I expect that bioIPSeeds' blockchain technology will allow us to identify a larger number of promising projects at an earlier stage of their development paths, while reducing the risk that potentially life-changing products slip under our radar.

In this regard, you became the first international customer of bioIPSeeds and Servier Japan will start operating the platform as from June 2016. What are your main expectations?

In 2016, we visited Taiwan three times and met around 30 companies and research centers, which required substantial resources and time. Furthermore, it is naturally impossible to visit all universities, researchers, emerging companies in a country. Thanks to bioIPSeeds, we could have a greater access to very early stage innovations, which we would have probably missed without the help of this platform.

Once we will get IP information on promising projects thanks to bioIPSeeds, we will then be able to share with our scientific experts based in Paris these data, and – depending on their feedback – evaluate the opportunity to move our collaboration forward with these researchers.

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