Almirall has grown into a mid-sized pharma company on the strength of successes in discovering, developing, and commercializing novel medicines. Now Almirall is entering a new phase in its evolution, in which it is narrowing its focus on dermatology and rethinking its approach to external collaborations. Here, Dr. Núria Godessart, Head of Skin Biology and Pharmacology at R&D in Almirall, discusses what the changes mean for the company, its researchers, and its partners.

Q: Where does dermatology fit into Almirall’s strategy?
Dermatology is our main focus now, but we have been active in the area for a long time. In the last years we have strengthened our presence and portfolio of derma products with strategic acquisitions. We started in 2007 with Almirall Hermal, a dermatology company based in Germany. In 2013, the incorporation of the US-based company Aqua Pharmaceuticals gave us access to the world’s largest pharmaceutical market. Last year, we acquired Poli Group and ThermiGen. As a result, dermatology was the main driver of sales at the company in 2015.

We now have a strong portfolio of dermatology products in all phases, coming from our internal R&D and recent licensing agreements.

Q: How would you describe the R&D culture at the company?
In Almirall we believe research and development is key for long-term success in this industry. We have a sound track record in R&D built on 40 years of experience.

Our R&D is guided by unmet medical needs and based on three pillars: science, innovation, and partnerships. We ultimately have to obtain products that are both valuable for the patients and commercially attractive and, to ensure this, we work very closely with our colleagues from Marketing.

We have three R&D centers in Europe - Spain, Germany and Switzerland – as well as R&D groups in our US affiliates. Our teams are composed of people from the different sites, and this means a combination of different skills and expertise. We complement our internal capabilities by establishing partnerships with public and private organisations, academic research teams, and biotechnology companies all over the world.

Q: How is the R&D model at Almirall changing and why?
We are focused on optimizing the performance and the efficiency at our different research centres. To me this is being a fantastic experience since we can take advantage of the cultural differences, background, knowledge and we can get the best from everyone.

Another factor that had a significant impact in the way we work is the route of administration. Dermatological diseases can be treated by systemic (oral, injectables) or topical treatments. The topical route expands the approaches we can pursue in R&D. Besides new chemical entities, we are also working in reformulation and repositioning programs, which have shorter clinical developments. This helps to balance resources, time to market, and risks. In addition, it strengthens relationships within R&D, because the contribution of development teams occurs much earlier in the process.

Many skin disorders are visible and this has a huge impact on the quality of life of patients. We know we must listen, learn, and act upon patient needs better than we have in the past. This means factoring the patient voice into R&D from the very start, for instance by ensuring compounds are compatible with the most suitable formulation for a particular disease and body region.

Q: What plans do you have to grow your skin biology and pharmacology operation?
In our team, researchers are focused on understanding disease pathogenesis, identifying and validating ideas, compounds, and therapeutic targets, and contributing to research programs. We have an experimental dermatology section running functional models required for all preclinical activities.

Our goal is to be strong in translational research, to develop novel models, and to identify biomarkers and predictors of clinical efficacy. We aim to close the gap between preclinical work and clinical development. We need to access external talent and are creating a network of experts in academia and hospitals. These activities are part of our ambition to become excellent in derma R&D. We are making a lot of advances in this direction and are excited to see the way it progresses.

Q: What opportunities do you see to team up with partners?
Promoting and encouraging strategic alliances is an integral part of Almirall’s business model. Traditionally in R&D we have collaborated on an ad hoc basis to increase our capacity, run research programs in areas where we had no expertise, or access experimental models. We will continue to do so, but are now also seeking scientific collaborations with groups of excellence and partnerships to access external talent, knowledge, and ideas. This will be achieved through open innovation initiatives that we will integrate into our organizational culture.

Q: Do you plan to join any existing collaborative initiatives?
Potentially. We are open to participating in collaborative European projects such as Innovative Medicines Initiative and Horizon 2020. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives are focused on diseases in therapeutic areas other than dermatology and we see few opportunities to participate.

The spirit behind these projects is appealing, though, so we are thinking creatively about how we can translate the approach to dermatology. One option could be to team up with other derma companies for precompetitive collaborations on areas of shared interest.

Q: What programs or areas of skin biology and pharmacology do you see as particularly promising?
We think that innovative drug repositioning is an exciting opportunity. We are currently exploring and integrating different repositioning tools and developing good experimental models to test the molecules emerging from them.

Our therapeutic focus is mainly composed of immune-inflammatory dermatoses like acne, rosacea, psoriasis, and atopic dermatitis. Orphan diseases are also an area of special interest for us. In fact, we have two orphan drugs in clinical development, a proprietary compound for pemphigus vulgaris and a product licensed from Patagonia for congenital ichthyosis.
“We provide valuable medicines and medical devices to you and future generations”

Almirall is a global company based in Barcelona dedicated to provide valuable medicines and medical devices through our R&D, agreements and alliances. Our work covers the whole of the drug value chain. A consolidated growth allows us to devote our talent and efforts towards specialty areas and particularly to further grow as a leading Dermatology player. We are a specialist company, enabling us to accomplish the purpose of providing our innovative products wherever they are needed.

We are working today for better health tomorrow