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IRBM UNLEASHES ITS PASSION FOR SCIENCE ON THE GLOBAL DRUG DISCOVERY MARKET

A conversation with **MATTEO LIGUORI**, Managing Director of IRBM



IRBM is a research organization working across all aspects of preclinical drug discovery and early development. IRBM fosters collaborations with the pharmaceutical, biotech and academic sectors to accelerate drug discovery from target validation and hit identification, to candidate nomination. Its 200-plus multidisciplinary team members work at a state-of-the-art R&D facility, near Rome, where projects are expedited by being carried out under one roof. IRBM's scientists have helped bring four drugs to the market, and a further 25 compounds to clinical testing. IRBM was founded in 2010, as a spin-off from Merck & Co. Now celebrating its 10th anniversary as an independent research organisation, IRBM's managing director, Matteo Liguori, is keen to share its passion and expertise with new global partners.

What are IRBM's main goals and company ethos?

IRBM's goals are to build lasting and productive relationships with our industry partners, and provide our staff with an inspiring, nurturing and forward-thinking workplace. We are a tight-knit community, having retained many of our scientists from Merck & Co, but we continue to recruit top-class scientists. Throughout the past decade we have laid the foundations to become a global centre for excellence in all aspects of drug discovery and early development.

What are some of IRBM's current projects and partnerships?

IRBM works in multiple areas of drug discovery. Among these, peptide therapeutics is a flourishing area, with promise for treating metabolic diseases, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Peptide drugs represent a unique opportunity, not only for intervention that closely mimics natural pathways, but for targeting wide protein/protein interaction surfaces, making them valuable drug candidates. In this field we continue to have a long-standing partnership with Merck & Co. Furthermore, we are collaborating with The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center to develop therapeutic monoclonal antibodies against a novel

immune checkpoint target. In 2018, we extended our partnership with the CHDI Foundation, a non-profit biomedical research organization that develops therapeutics for Huntington's Disease. IRBM also owns the manufacturing organization ADVENT, which specializes in developing adenovirus-based therapies and was involved in the successful development of a vaccine for Ebola. Just recently, ADVENT signed an agreement with The Jenner Institute, Oxford University to develop a novel vaccine for coronavirus and we are very proud to be involved in the international effort against this outbreak.

What success has IRBM had?

IRBM scientists have contributed to the delivery of new drugs to the market plus an impressive number of candidates at various stages of development. Many of our current partnerships have grown via word of mouth, a testament to our great science. 2020 is our 10th anniversary and we have reached a new phase where we want to leverage our strong reputation and track record to become a major player.

What skills does IRBM bring to its partnerships?

Our teams comprise of chemists and biologists from disciplines, meaning that we can

IN THIS NEW DECADE WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO BRINGING NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATION TO EVERY COLLABORATION.

confidently take on projects in a wide variety of conditions and diseases. We have expertise in, and access to, multiple technologies and capabilities which include phage display libraries, NMR spectroscopy, metabolomics, medicinal and organic chemistry, stem cell models, biomarker identification and development, blood brain barrier models and the latest high-throughput screening systems. Most of our scientists have come to IRBM from pharma and biotech firms, so we have a strong understanding of the challenges they face and how our potential partners like to work.

How has the drug discovery sector changed since IRBM began?

In 2009, the drug discovery market was undergoing considerable change. The global economic downturn meant many pharma R&D sites were closing and the establishment of biotech, often virtual, were rising. This has led to an impressive number of joint

collaborations and outsourced research opportunities in all sectors of the life science industry and academia, and the CRO market has grown significantly to address this need. With the huge choice of service providers available today, it is fundamental to partner with the right company or CRO whose scientists have outstanding knowledge of the field. Currently, each partner brings specific skills and expertise to the table and the need to collaborate extensively is critical during the process of uncovering new drugs and bringing them to the market. At IRBM, we recognise this need for collaboration and are proud to be building a strong reputation in the discovery field.

What are your plans for the next decade?

Our plan is to double our group turnover and our scientific workforce and foster new collaborations in key fields such as oncology, neuroscience, antiviral and rare diseases. We're actively seeking new partners across the globe, both in regions where we already have a strong presence, and in new regions, too.



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