Every year, more than 750,000 people die from an infection that resist currently available drugs. The development of antibiotics in the 1940’s radically changed healthcare and greatly improved life expectancy. However, the last generation of truly new antibiotics was discovered about 40 years ago, thus enabling the emergence of resistant bacteria throughout the world. In the absence of truly innovative therapies, the situation is bound to get worse: current forecast predict that 10 million people will die from resistant infection by 2050. Therefore, there is a crucial need to develop new approaches to treat sever infections for which we are running out of pharmacological tools while preventing new resistances.

From the ULB laboratories to the Santero Therapeutics start-up

Two researchers from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) - professors Abel Garcia-Pino and Cédric Govaerts- created Santero Therapeutics, to tackle this challenge. This spin-off company aims at developing first-in-class antibiotics. “Our research at the University aims at uncovering basic mechanisms, not perform drug-design. That's why the development of these new antibiotics must be made in a separate structure, hence the idea of creating a spin-off company” says Cédric Govaerts. “Our work is a fine example showing how basic research feeds applied research”.

Santero Therapeutics takes its roots in a deep expertise developed in the two teams in the Faculty of Sciences of the ULB. "In our laboratories, whether within the Institut de Biologie et de Médecine Moléculaires (IBMM) or the Structure et Fonction des Membranes Biologiques (SFMB), we aim to uncover basic molecular mechanisms of bacterial metabolism, but we have also realized that our work could open a door to fight critical infections. I remember the very moment when Abel showed me the key new data” says Cédric Govaerts, “he had characterized an enzyme that is crucial for bacterial survival. If we could inhibit this Achille’s heel, we could stop the infection”.

This discovery is a game changer. “While traditional antibiotics were discovered serendipitously, getting inspiration from natural products, our strategy relies on a truly innovative approach that should greatly limit the emergence of resistance” says Abel Garcia-Pino.

“Because these key enzymes that are essential in all bacteria, we could -in principle- target any type of bacterial infection and thus apply our approaches to many clinical indications” says Cédric Govaerts.

Funding from both private investors and the Walloon region

With the help of the Technology Transfer Office of the ULB and in partnership with ULB dev, the two scientists created Santero Therapeutics in March 2021. “The word Santero is a nod to my origins as it refers to the traditional healers in the Cuban culture” says Abel, who was born in Cuba before coming to
Belgium for his PhD, an eventually settle there.

This ambitious project quickly drew attention from private investors who, beyond the business perspective, can see the public health benefit.

An initial funding (“seed money”) of 1,1M was rapidly finalized subsequently matched by a 1,4M subsidy from the Walloon region. “Biotechnologies are very active in Wallonia” says Cédric Govaerts. “Coming to the Charleroi Biopark was very natural. The support from the Walloon region is essential to start our operations in the best possible conditions which will enable us to engage future investors”. Indeed, a second funding round, scheduled for 2022, will bring together a venture capital fund as lead investor and several traditional investors.

The excitement is palpable with the founders and, although the star-up is very young, the goals of a rapid expansion are clear “We aim to assemble a cutting-edge team and have already attracted among the very best talents to take the project forward” says Abel Garcia-Pino. “But we also realize that starting and running a company is particular job. Cédric and I remain University scientists. We will be scientific advisors for Santero but the company will grow its own team to rapidly reach its ambitious goals”.

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