

There can be no new world without a proper policy for pharmaceuticals

Opinion piece by Frédéric Collet, Chairman of Leem (French Pharmaceutical Companies Association)

For almost a year now, humanity has been fighting the biggest health crisis of the post-World War II era.

As well as revealing our strengths and resilience, this period has also highlighted the shortcomings and fragilities from which we suffer as a country, particularly in manufacturing and science.

Let's rewind one year. It's February 2020, and the epidemic that emerged in China is beginning to spread to other parts of the world... We don't yet know the scale of what is to come, but we're about to enter a new world governed by the laws of a virus we know nothing about.

Now, one year later, let's look back at how far we've come!

Around 2,500 clinical trials have been launched worldwide to identify therapeutic and vaccine solutions. Never in the history of medicine has vaccine research been so massive and so fast. Nearly 300 candidate vaccines are now under development, and 3 vaccines have already been approved at European level and made available to French patients.

In just a few months, significant progress was also made in the quest to develop treatments. We now have therapeutic solutions that have proven effective, and research continues at pace.

These successes have been made possible thanks to the unprecedented level of collaboration between companies that have traditionally been competitors. The pandemic has also reminded us of two major truths: firstly, that pharmaceuticals are definitely much more than simply a product like any other, and secondly, that research brings with it a great deal of uncertainty, with pharmaceutical companies bearing a very large share of the accompanying risk.

In the wider sense, this health crisis has also highlighted the resilience of the pharmaceutical industry, whose global mobilisation has empowered it to cope with unprecedented levels of demand for pharmaceuticals. In their response to this public health emergency, companies with an operating presence in France have made it their non-negotiable priority to ensure continuity of patient access to pharmaceuticals.

Nevertheless, the crisis has also highlighted a certain number of weaknesses against which we have long warned, and particularly the dependence of Europe on other countries for its supplies of raw materials

and pharmaceuticals, and the decline of French research in the face of increasingly fierce international competition, not only between companies, but now also between nation states.

Our government has responded with its *France Relance* national recovery plan. Since last summer, positive steps have been taken towards changing the policy that, over the last decade, has subjected France's pharmaceutical industry to a level of regulatory pressure unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. Public policy makers now openly agree that treating the sector as a variable for adjusting health policy has led us to where we find ourselves today.

Now is the time to learn all the lessons of this crisis, and put in place the foundations for building a proper policy for pharmaceuticals in post-Covid France. This policy must embrace every aspect of pharmaceutical development and manufacture, from research through clinical development and manufacturing to patient access. It must be a much clearer and more predictable policy that reconciles short-term initiatives with the medium- and long-term goals strategically vital for our industry.

The French president has announced that a new Strategic Council for Healthcare Industries will be held this summer. We must, as a country, seize this opportunity to deliver effective responses to the three major challenges revealed by this crisis.

The challenge of boosting our competitive position in research, which is fragmented, difficult to decipher and paralysed by stifling levels of administration. Those European countries that have been able to progress fastest are those that have successfully broken down barriers to create a flexible and virtuous ecosystem spanning public-sector research, biotechs and major pharmaceutical companies.

The challenge of manufacturing, which again requires us to become more competitive in order to reshore the production of active ingredients and mature finished products in Europe, and to boost our appeal for inward investment by the manufacturers of tomorrow's pharmaceuticals so that they choose to locate in France, rather than in Germany or the UK.

Lastly, there is the challenge of patient access to pharmaceuticals, which requires clear and predictable assessment, competitive access times and a return to the industry growth our country has lacked for very nearly ten years. We do not want to reach the position where French patients are deprived of therapeutic solutions that become available to our European neighbours.

As key stakeholders in emerging successfully from the crisis through their commitment to research and innovation, industrial and scientific investment, employment and training, pharmaceutical companies operating in France have every determination to fulfil their role in this national mobilisation effort.

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