

Sir Christopher Evans

The Wizard Behind the Throne

Michael Gross

Merlin the wizard is a well known figure from ancient Celtic legends, who was later recruited to the Arthurian circle, where he was seen as a teacher of young Arthur and as the magic power behind the throne.



Sir Christopher Evans

Thus it is no surprise that Welsh-born “serial company founder” (in his own words) and multiple biotech entrepreneur Chris Evans chose the name Merlin when he set up a seed capital firm in 1996, effectively moving on from founding and leading his own biotech companies to a

role involving nurturing new companies and pulling strings behind the scenes. And his magic really does seem to work wonders, as by now, Merlin Biosciences Ltd. has invested in 24 flourishing biotech companies in Europe, making it the biggest biotech investor in Europe (www.merlin-biosciences.com).

Back in 1979, Evans graduated from Imperial College, London, with a BSc in microbiology. He then decided to move into applied science and completed an industry-sponsored PhD in lipid biochemistry at the University of Hull. After several career moves between different biotech companies in the US and Canada, he returned to Britain and launched his first company, Enzymatix, in October 1987. In 1992, he split up Enzymatix into several companies (including Chiroscience and Celsis), and went on to found several more. By the end of the decade, his companies were selling £ 200 million worth of products every year. Setting up Merlin Biosciences as a specialised venture investor in life sciences companies together with his trusted allies Peter Keen from Chiroscience and Mark Clement from Celsis, Evans became a “parallel rather than serial entrepreneur”. At the time, finance circles appeared to be shocked by the idea that a scientist came meddling with investment. He told Business Weekly that “there are people in the City who would love to see me fall flat on my face.” However, the unconventional move turned into a major success in many ways.

By 1999, Evans had risen to fourth place in a chart of Britain’s top 100 most successful entrepreneurs, based on revenue and jobs creation over the previous 5 years. He was also called up by the Blair government to advise on biotechnology and entrepreneurial culture in Britain. He has also received numerous prizes and awards, including several honorary doctorates. On the practical front of work-life balance, switching to behind-the-scenes investment wizardry allowed Evans to settle down and spend more time with his family. It also enabled him to focus his activities on the part of the process that many people involved in the biotech industry would probably describe as the most exciting one: the evolution leading from the first idea to creating a company and making sure it has what it needs to survive.

Merlin raised investment for its companies in three rounds. The first two have netted over € 300 million, the third one is due to close later this year. The current portfolio of 24 companies – spanning the alphabet from Amedis to XTL – covers as many different approaches to novel therapies, including small molecules, antibodies, and whole cells. Some of the companies also specialise in healthcare products, vaccines, or software. Evans and the other partners involved in Merlin, including co-founders Keen and Clement, like to keep a very close involvement with the companies they launch. Typically, they say, one of the partners will be in touch with the company on a day-to-day basis. With such a broad portfolio of companies, the partners won’t get bored any time soon, as there is always something exciting going on somewhere. For example, the Dundee-based company Cyclacel (www.cyclacel.com), which evolved from the research of p53 discoverer David Lane, develops anti-cancer drugs based on controlling the cell cycle. Cyclacel, where Evans is on the board, has recently reported biomarker results which suggest that in more than half of the patients who received their most advanced drug candidate, CYC202 in phase I trials, cancer cells have been driven to apoptosis. Phase II trials of this compound are currently under way.



In a completely different approach to cancer, Merlin-funded company Onyvax (London, www.onyvax.com) develops preparations of cell cultures resembling prostate cancer cells, which are then inactivated by radiation and used as vaccine therapeutics in order to stimulate the patient’s immune system to fight back the cancer.

Vectura Ltd. (www.vectura.co.uk), another company of the Merlin portfolio, develops drugs to be administered by in-

halation. Their most advanced candidate drug, AD 237, has just entered phase IIa trials for the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a very common disorder in smokers and one of the leading causes of death in the industrialised world. Also entering phase II trials is an analgesic patch developed by portfolio company

Epicept (www.epicept.com), which is to be used for the treatment of post-operative pain. It is currently being tested on patients recovering after hernia operations.

Like the examples listed here, most of the companies in the current portfolio of 24 have been able to put the financial worries of the start-up process behind them and get on with the real business of producing

scientific results. The most recent financial coup was the re-financing of Ardana, a company specialising on women's healthcare, which raised £ 20 million in a record-breaking funding round earlier this year. Ardana are hoping to launch their first product, an androgen replacement therapy in Europe next year. Once the companies had success stories to show, and the media and the City got used to the idea that Evans was out and about funding biotech startups, the headlines about him died down a bit. Only once this year was the general public reminded of his existence, when Evans joined a bidding contest for the company Oxford Glycoscience, which however ended up being taken over by Celltech.

In the New Year's Honours list of 2001, New Labour promoted the biotech wizard Chris Evans to the

knight Sir Christopher, but will that move turn him into a soft-spoken aristocrat? No fear. In connection with an outspoken, rugby-loving Welshman like him, the word "kighthood" is more likely to evoke the fighting spirit of the Arthurian legends once more.

www.merlin-biosciences.com

