Les Echos

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Biotech : « Europe has lost 60,000 clinical trials in five years for lack of industrial ambition”»

A legislative initiative aimed at reviving the biotechnology industry within the European Union is currently being prepared by the European Commission. Christian Pierret, former Minister Delegate for Industry and SMEs, argues in favor of this initiative to revive a sector facing intense international competition

Pharmaceutical companies are the first to suffer from Europe’s lack of leadership in biotechnology. The threat of an exodus—particularly to the United States—is becoming increasingly pressing. (Photo iStock)

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The European Union stands at a decisive turning point for its industrial and healthcare future. As the European Commission prepares the “Biotech Act,” legislation intended to strengthen research and development in the biotechnology industry in Europe, the timing is critical.

This text, which is expected to be presented in mid-December, aims to simplify regulatory frameworks, support innovation, and assert a form of industrial and healthcare “sovereignty” for the Union. It represents a unique opportunity to correct the structural weaknesses that currently hinder the growth of Europe’s biotechnology industries.

A real loss of momentum

Despite world-class academic research, renowned university hospitals, and high-level private laboratories, the European Union is gradually losing its ability to translate this scientific excellence into breakthrough therapeutic innovations accessible to Europeans.

This decline is tangible: reduced competitiveness, slower investment, and growing dependence on the United States or Asia for therapeutic advances—many of which originate in European R&D. The U.S. threat to impose tariffs on European pharmaceutical products highlights how exposed our companies remain to major international competitive distortions. Should such measures materialize, they would increase costs and further hinder innovation efforts.

Endogenous levers for action

However, the most serious threat lies within the Union itself: a lack of strategic vision and industrial policy, insufficient and unstable funding, and a complex, uncompetitive regulatory framework. Too many European discoveries are industrialized elsewhere due to unattractive conditions within the single market of 27 countries.

The obstacles are well known: fragmented regulation compounded by rigid assessment procedures that are excessively cautious toward disruptive innovation. Reimbursement models are poorly adapted to therapeutic value, and the investment environment remains less dynamic than that of our competitors—despite the efforts of certain Member States such as France with Bpifrance, the research tax credit, and the favorable status granted to innovative young companies.

As a result, promising innovations stagnate, start-ups relocate, and European patients are unable to benefit from certain effective treatments that have already proven their value in other countries.

To reverse this trend, the Life Sciences Acceleration Alliance (LSAA) recommends that the European Union act on three essential levers.

1. Ambitious Multi-Annual Funding

Therapeutic innovation is based on long, risky, and costly cycles: bringing a new molecule to market requires on average €1 billion in investment, 10 years of work, and nearly 10,000 molecules tested.

Without multiannual visibility or fiscal and budgetary stability, few European companies can sustainably support such levels of scientific and industrial demands.

2. A Simplified and Aligned Regulatory Framework

The European Union must harmonize and accelerate its procedures. Clinical trial approval timelines illustrate the gap: an average of 104 days in France compared with only 30 days at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The direct consequence is stark: Europe has lost 60,000 clinical trials in five years, according to the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA), lengthening patient access to innovation and raising costs for start-ups and investors.

An ambitious Biotech Act must correct these dysfunctions by creating a clear, swift, and competitive environment.

3. Fair and Competitive Market Conditions

The European Union must ensure fairer valuation of innovation in order to finance future breakthroughs and increase its attractiveness to long-term investors.

Greater vigilance and firmness are required in the face of trade barriers that threaten patients' access to new therapies.

Act—or Watch Others Act

Finally, the European Commission must provide innovators with a predictable, fast, and competitive regulatory framework. Without decisive action, talent and capital will continue to leave the European Union, which would become merely an importer of therapies often invented on its own soil but developed and manufactured elsewhere.

"Remain a leader—or resign oneself to being a follower."

Remain a leader — or resign itself to becoming a follower: the choice now rests with Europe's institutions. But time is running out. Action is urgently needed.

Christian Pierret is a former Minister Delegate for Industry and SMEs and a board member of European investors LSAA (Life Sciences Acceleration Alliance).

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