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05 June 2008

World Entrepreneur of Year Borrows Attitude From Silicon Valley French cardiologist creates new approach to pharmaceuticals research



Dr. Jean-Paul Clozel is World Entrepreneur of the Year.

By Judith Hasson
Special Correspondent

Washington -- When Dr. Jean-Paul Clozel, a French citizen, was a cardiologist at the University of California at San Francisco, he watched the birth and explosive growth of the biotechnology industry in nearby Silicon Valley and observed American entrepreneurs' traits. They were ready to take risks, and they persevered through adversity.

"Entrepreneurship is a very U.S. feature," Clozel said. "In the United States, people are not afraid to fail."

After working as a physician in California, Clozel turned to research and spent 12 years at the pharmaceutical company F. Hoffmann-La Roche in Switzerland, where he was responsible for the selection of the first T-channel blocker to treat hypertension and angina.

Inspired by what he saw in California, in 1997 Clozel left his well-paying job at Hoffman-La Roche to start a new company, Actelion Pharmaceuticals Ltd. He and his wife, Martine, who is a pediatrician and pharmacologist, worked without pay for months while supporting three young children, but eventually they found their dream coming true. "Some people dream about becoming a pilot or auto racer," Clozel said. But ever since medical school, "I wanted to discover drugs."

Clozel, now 53, said he applied the lessons he learned from his time in California as he launched Actelion in Basel, Switzerland.

"We wanted to bring the spirit of the Silicon Valley to the Rhine [River area]," Clozel said.

In 10 years, Actelion has become the fifth largest biotechnology company in the world.

On May 31 in Monte Carlo, Clozel was honored as the World Entrepreneur of the Year by Ernst & Young, a global business-services company, for his innovations, his successes, and, yes, his willingness to take risks. "I like the freedom of being an entrepreneur, and when you are an entrepreneur, freedom is very tough. Freedom has a price. ... It is successes and failures, and you share both," Clozel said after accepting his award.

Clozel, his wife and two other partners hit their first milestone when they developed Tracleer, a drug that slows the progress of the life-threatening disease pulmonary arterial hypertension.

Tracleer had more than \$1 billion in sales in 2007. Some 20,000 people worldwide have been treated with the medication. It is estimated there are many more -- up to 200,000 -- who suffer from pulmonary arterial hypertension. The drug is no cure, Clozel told *America.gov*, but it improves and extends the life of patients who take it.

The company did not stop with Tracleer. It has 12 drugs in clinical development for many diseases, including multiple sclerosis, stroke, pulmonary fibroid disease and insomnia, and a new drug for pulmonary hypertension.

"We are not specializing in one type of disease, but really on one type of approach," he said.

Actelion turned doing research upside down. Instead of working to cure a specific disease, its researchers identify a potential new drug and look for the best disease to block with that compound. They tested the compound in Tracleer on a variety of

ailments, including migraines.

There is no money associated with the award, just prestige. But Clozel said there already have been many rewards for his work. The best one, he said, is that "people are living a much longer life. Many of the first patients [who use Tracleer] are still alive."

Tracleer is available in more than 50 markets worldwide, including the United States, Canada, the European Union, Japan and Switzerland. Actelion still has its headquarters in Basel but has subsidiaries in 24 countries.

"I think we would never have thought we would be in such a large company so rapidly," Clozel said.

Risk-taking behavior and fast-growing success are not the only things Clozel borrowed from Silicon Valley. He also picked up a casual attitude from American businesspeople. Today, he does not like being called "Dr. Clozel." He wants to be known as "Jean-Paul," by everyone.

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