

## **PRESS RELEASE January 31<sup>st</sup> 2018**

**Event** - Laboratory Flen Health Luxembourg Inauguration

**Contact** - Philippe Sollie, CEO of Flen Health SA

### **The story of Flen Health SA**

My name is Philippe Sollie. In 2000 I founded Flen Pharma, a company based around an innovative product for wound care, Flamigel. Flen Pharma is based in Kontich and now has branches in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and Luxembourg, with a total workforce of around 80 employees.

But there's a whole story which comes before that. It all began more than 20 years ago, in the 1990s, when one of my friends' one-year-old daughter suffered severe burns during a family BBQ. She had only recently learned to walk and there was a deep-fat fryer on one of the tables. As she toddled along, the little girl tried to steady herself by grabbing the electric cord; the deep-fat fryer tipped over and covered her with boiling hot chip fat. The little girl was admitted to the burns unit in Stuivenberg, but it soon became apparent that she was allergic to the existing treatment products.

When I heard this, I contacted Dr Peeters, who was head of department at the time, to ask if he would be willing to advise me in developing a product to help this girl. This is how Flamigel came into being. I distinctly remember the moment that Dr Peeters said to me, after I had been working on the product for some time, "You've done it. This is a good product. Bring it onto the market, I want to prescribe this to my patients."

The reality was more complex. Compiling a registration dossier and obtaining the approval to bring the new product onto the market took quite some time. In 1999, Belgium ratified the EU directive for CE marking of medical devices. Without this legislation I would never have been able to register the product independently.

Initially I worked with distributors and in 2000 I signed my first contract with UCB, which positioned and launched Flamigel as an OTC product in Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece. Next came Zambon, and after that Novartis Consumer Health. Saudi Arabia and China were my first forays into the export market.

Flen was originally based in the UBCA, the spin-off centre of the University of Antwerp. This is the former Virco-Tibotec lab. It was a tough couple of years. In 2001, I couldn't even pay the rent. It was Marc van Boven of the University of Antwerp who came to my aid and vouched for me in front of the board. "Have patience," he said, "Mr. Sollie will get there for sure, and then he'll be able to pay his rent." And four months later, as UCB began to sell more and more of the product and as my revenues rose, Marc van Boven was proved right and I managed to pay back the rent.

The revenues from these contracts ensured that Flen remained independent, although to begin with they weren't high enough to finance both the ongoing scientific support of the products and the development of new products.

Between 2003 and 2007, Flen succeeded in bringing two more products for wound treatment onto the market. These products, Flaminal Hydro and Flaminal Forte, led to another shift in the wound care market in Belgium and beyond.

What was radically different about Flaminal is that it tackles all the factors that are responsible for poor wound healing together. That's why one of the ingredients used by Flaminal is enzymes with an antibacterial action, in the place of traditional antibiotics or antiseptics. We obtained a patent for this.

The great benefit of this innovative approach is that, unlike traditional antiseptics and local antibiotics, Flaminal only kills the bacteria in the wound and not the surrounding skin cells. The delicate, newly formed skin cells that are generated while the wound is healing are especially sensitive and can be killed by traditional approaches, which slows down the production of new skin cells. In other words, this slows the wound's natural healing process. We've been able to prove that the enzymes in Flaminal kill bacteria but are not toxic to these skin cells.

What does this mean in concrete terms? In the past, when a doctor was confronted with a poorly or slowly healing wound, they had two options: they could use toxic antiseptics or local antibiotics to lower the risk of infection but at the cost of delaying the wound's healing process, or they could use non-toxic products to promote the wound healing, but these were products with no antibacterial protection, meaning the risk of infection remained. With Flaminal, a doctor or wound care specialist can treat the wound with a safe product that stimulates wound healing while preventing infection.

Initially, Novartis was not interested in Flaminal, so I cautiously formed my own commercial network in Belgium, and began looking for new distributors abroad. The UK was the first country I exported Flaminal to.

Once again that turned out to be a good decision as I received incredible feedback about Flaminal from both doctors and patients.

Professor Monstrey from the Ghent Burns Centre was, and still is, a man with many innovative ideas about burn treatments and together with his team he is a firm advocate of Flaminal. He developed a totally new method for burn care based around Flaminal, and it has become the benchmark for wound care in many countries in Europe and beyond.

One of the first patients to be treated with Flaminal was a diabetes patient in Gasthuisberg Hospital, Leuven, who had gangrene. First his toes had to be amputated, then his foot, and then his lower leg. Not long afterwards, his entire leg had to be amputated and he was left with a gaping wound that refused to heal. He said to Rudi Deleus, the head nurse at the time, "Just send me home, I can rot away just as well there as I can here." But they decided to treat his wound with Flaminal, and it healed. I wasn't aware of this at the time, but when I called to visit Rudi Deleus, he took me to see the patient and told him, "This is the man who invented that ointment." The expression on the patient's face when he looked at me is something I will never forget. If anyone ever asks me, "why do you run Flen?" that is the reason right there. I truly helped that patient.

Another time, I was abroad training doctors and nurses in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia with Professor Richard White, a British professor in tissue viability. At the end of one of the training sessions, a small, frail elderly nurse (she must have been 75 or 80 years old) came up to me and asked, "are you the man who developed Flaminal?" When I said yes, she looked up at me through sparkling eyes and said, "if you only knew how many people with difficult wounds I've been able to help with your product, you would be astounded." Her eyes shone, and so did mine.

When Novartis eventually became interested, it was too late for them. With Flen and Flaminal I was well on the way to becoming a touchstone in professional wound treatment and I didn't want to let that go. In fact, the opposite happened. Bit by bit, I took back the sale of Flamigel from Novartis. I started a sales network in the Netherlands and, more recently, one in Germany. Last year I took control of the sale of Flaminal in the UK.

In all countries, we mainly operate in the area of wound care for healthcare professionals – Flaminal Forte for wounds in hospitals, Flaminal Hydro for wounds being treated by doctors and nurses outside the hospital, and Flamigel for skin damage caused by radiotherapy (oncology).

Only in Belgium do we continue our activities in home wound care with Flamigel.

And so, Flen continued to grow. In 2016, it had a workforce of 80 staff and brought 145,000 kg of ointment onto the market.

That is a million miles from where I started out in 2000, when UCB asked me to found a company so that I could sign a distribution contract. I had no business plan, no strategy. All I had was a product that I'd developed to help that little girl, an approved registration dossier and a few doctors who wanted to prescribe it.

There has also been a considerable increase in the export of products outside of Europe. In fact, we expect to see the largest increase in export in the next three years.

Naturally, a lot of investment has also gone into back-office activities, for example we have a regulatory department with five employees, and the finance & logistics department also have five members of staff. An application to register Flamigel with the FDA has been approved, and another application has been submitted for Flaminal. Applications to various other countries are in the preparation stage.

There was all this investment in growth, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the product portfolio wasn't big enough and that I needed to embark on new research activities again. We then started a research project focusing on optimising enzyme technology in wound treatment and skin care.

I am convinced that our focus on the patient, the fact that the patient is at the centre of everything we do, is the basis for the innovative and unique nature of our products. We want to retain our identity and keep in touch with what Flen stands for.

Innovative and game-changing products need time to gain recognition. A paradigm is not changed in an instant. Innovative products, especially in the healthcare sector, are not a 'quick win'. Impatient people and those who do not put the patient first, would not fit in at Flen.

The patient is at the forefront for us, simply because we still have so much suffering to relieve in so many patients. We will never give up on our conviction that we can keep offering our patients better products. These are the things that make Flen who we are. In my experience, when you truly start listening to your patient, to what they need, that's the fastest way to find out whether you are on the right track with your product.

Thank you for your attention.

Philippe Sollie

CEO of Flen Health SA