

# interview

## Graham Dixon talks about his career, his involvement with the Society for Chemical Industries and the development of SCIpharm2006

Interviewed by **Steve Carney**

### ***Could you tell me a little bit about your career history?***

I received a PhD in biochemistry from the University of Swansea, and then went into the agrochemical industry, with Dow Agrochemicals. I spent five years there, building the biochemistry group. I then decided to move into pharmaceuticals; one of the reasons for this was that my grandmother was, at that time, suffering from cancer and I thought that I wanted to do more with my scientific background than just helping to feed people. So I moved into pharmaceuticals – to Zeneca – into the antifungal research programme. I moved from fungi that affected crops to dealing with fungi that affect humans. Zeneca were just re-establishing their antifungal programme, they had dropped it in 1985 based on a commercial decision – there really wasn't a market at the time. Then AIDS came along, as well as advances in immuno-

### **Graham Dixon**

Senior Vice President, Drug Discovery, Galapagos

Graham Dixon read for a PhD in biochemistry at Swansea and subsequently spent time in the Agrochemical industry with Dow. He later became interested in following a career in the pharmaceutical industry and joined Zeneca (now AstraZeneca) in 1994 to establish a programme in antifungal agents. While at Zeneca, Graham gained experience in managing and developing an Oncology portfolio. From Zeneca, Graham moved into the biopharmaceutical arena as the CSO of developing as well as more established companies. At present, he is the senior Vice President, Drug Discovery, of Galapagos, a genomics-based drug discovery company. Graham is the Chairman of the organising committee of SCIpharm 2006, a multidisciplinary conference supported by the Society of Chemical Industries. He has worked with the SCI for some 16 years, organising many conferences. Last year he received a distinguished service award, recognising his contribution to the society.



suppressive treatments, and fungi came back with a vengeance. So Zeneca came back in 1994, which was when I joined, and I was involved in setting up that new effort. We selected and validated novel targets, using state-of-the-art genomics-based technologies to assist the drug discovery process. I was also involved in antibacterial projects and moving some of these to preclinical development. I stayed in this role for 6 years and then decided I wanted to grow myself, I wanted to experience the development function, so I secured an opportunity within Zeneca as a product manager and I was involved in the development of 4 oncology products, all cytotoxics. These were at various stages of development, we had one product in Phase I, two in Phase II, and a launched product. So I was involved in all stages of product development, although not with the same product. After I had done this for three years and gained a detailed insight into the development of a product, I decided that I wanted to try to combine my research and development experience, and one

of the best ways to do that was in a small company in a biotech environment. I had the opportunity to move as chief scientific officer to a company called F2G – an antifungal company – based in Manchester. They were a target discovery company wanting to transition to a product-based company, which is what I went in to achieve. They were also trying to in-license a product and I was there to lead that effort. I then moved from F2G to a more established company in Strasbourg as CSO, the company was called Entomed. The company's unique selling point was isolating natural compounds from a wide variety of insects. Having spent some time optimising antimicrobial peptides as therapies, they decided that this was not a way to build a sustainable business; they wanted to get into small molecules. So I came in again to transition the company from peptides to small molecules. We set up an oncology and anti-infective discovery effort and we were successful in establishing an early phase portfolio. I then got the opportunity to move to Galapagos, which I saw

as a step up in the biotech ladder. It was a more established company, better funded and based on a technology platform to discover and validate drug targets by modulating genes within primary human cells. The company had focussed initially on developing the platform technology and applying it to identify targets in several therapy areas. They then wanted to develop novel medicines which modulated some of these targets, specializing in bone and joint diseases. So I came in as chief scientific officer just over 15 months ago, to lead that process and establish a new product-based company. In that time we floated the company in May 2005 and we also acquired BioFocus in October. We are moving our portfolio forward now as rapidly as possible towards the clinic.

**How did you become involved with the Society for Chemical Industries (SCI)?**

I've been working with the SCI for about 16 years. It all started with a suggestion from Len Copping, who was a member of the Pesticides group originally and was also with Dow. He asked me whether I wanted to get involved with the SCI and its conference organization. I was introduced to the organization and got involved with a few meetings, initially with a conference called 'opportunities for molecular biology – crop protection'. We then did a series of conferences on genomics, high-throughput screening and various other one-day meetings where I was chair of the organising committee. During that time it became difficult for me to be on the Pesticides group because I had moved into the pharmaceutical arena, so a couple of us formulated a plan to spin out a subsection of the Pesticides group which we called the Bioactive Sciences group. They were doing similar things but were in a position to focus more on the pharmaceutical industry. While I was chairman of this group, one of our goals was to establish better links with other special interest groups within the SCI, and as a consequence cover the pharmaceutical sector in much more depth. So, in collaboration with the Fine Chemicals group, we decided to try to come up with a flagship event that would run on a two-yearly cycle, and that was where the concept of SCLpharm arose. That's what I've been doing with the SCI. I have very much enjoyed being involved with the society and was delighted to be awarded a distinguished service award last year recognizing my service to the society. I continue to enjoy doing this, trying to set up events that will help young people attend the conferences and develop their own networks, in the way that I had the opportunity through my own work and through the SCI.

**What made the SCI think that a Pharma conference in Europe would be a successful event? What could you provide that the other competing conferences couldn't?**

We believe that we have found a niche in the conference calendar. Yes, there are a lot of conferences, particularly in the USA, aimed at the pharmaceutical sector. We tried to pull together an event that was organized by the industry for the industry – people working within the industry made up the organising committee. So they were trying to pull in the hot topics, get the coverage and use their networks in Europe and ultimately in the USA to try and bring top-flight speakers. We also went for an event which had breadth, so we covered right from target discovery through to clinical, regulatory and commercialisation to try to and provide an overview for delegates, primarily to attract scientists, providing them the opportunity to understand the whole business. That was the original hypothesis behind the conference. It was all to be done at an affordable cost compared with the many of the other competing conferences. They tend to focus on attracting senior management, whereas we were trying to attract the practising scientists as well as, of course, other disciplines from the industry.

**How do you think you succeeded in SCLpharm 2004?**

We certainly believe it was a great success. First, we attracted just over 500 delegates, which was a great achievement because this was the inaugural conference and the SCI didn't have an established reputation for that type of meeting in the pharmaceutical sector. So we were very pleased to be able to attract that number of people. In addition, we had very positive feedback from the delegates saying that they enjoyed the format of the meeting, the quality of the speakers and the four parallel-track structure was very well-received. The conference also featured an exhibition which was an integral part of the conference – we received very positive delegate feedback about this as well. This added another dimension to the conference and gave a real feel of a big pharmaceutical conference. All this gave us the incentive to go ahead with SCLpharm 2006.

**'An event organized by the industry for the industry'**

**Do you think that the European focus of this conference affords it any advantages?**

I think it does, Edinburgh is a beautiful city full of history and breathtaking architecture.

It is a fantastic venue but also, although the pharmaceutical industry is global, there are distinct differences between the USA and Europe. So we can harness that European focus by bringing in the appropriate experts from within Europe. We don't ignore the USA but I think it is far to say that the focus is predominantly European. It provides networking opportunities with delegates from other European countries. I don't want to create the impression it is only for Europeans, we did also attract significant numbers from the USA and Asia in 2004.

**'It gives people networking opportunities from other European countries'**

**What did you learn from 2004 that you have changed for this conference?**

We obviously responded to feedback from delegates and exhibitors, and what we have done for 2006 is to repeat the multi track format that was very well-received. We will also continue to make the exhibition an integral part of the conference. The programme will be very similar, focussing on hot topics – we have put together a very high quality programme. These are some of the things that we are retaining from 2004. However, in 2006 we will include many new features, such as a plenary business section, which covers a wide range of topics. We are also providing the delegates with the opportunity to book one-on-one business meetings – these will run throughout the conference. We have scheduling software to allow us to make that happen for people and that should help to facilitate meetings for people in business development, licensing and so on and help them to get added value from the conference. Another new feature introduced for 2006 is the new investigator's programme. The event obviously attracts experienced pharmaceutical industry professionals but it also attracts newcomers to the industry – the event has established a good reputation and is at affordable cost. So what we've recognized is that it is very important to help these newcomers in building networks within the industry. We have a few sessions where we will help to introduce young investigators to some of our networks – the SCI organising committee will play a pivotal role in this respect.

**'It is very important to help newcomers in building networks within the industry'**

***What did you see were the key scientific highlights from the 2004 meeting?***

For me, some of the highlights were the talks addressing target discovery, these summarized the strengths and weaknesses of most of the technologies which have been used. We also had presentations on some of the state of the art aspects of identifying and optimizing chemical compounds to advance them rapidly to drugs. I think that the track dealing with the regulatory issues facing the pharmaceutical industry, particularly around emerging issues with drug safety was a very important part of the conference. We covered other things like project management techniques, and the motivation and retention of key staff. I would summarize by saying there was something for everyone at the conference.

***'State of the art aspects of identifying and optimising chemical compounds'******How has the conference changed in the two intervening years?***

If you look at the plenary lectures, some of the highlights will be the talks from John Patterson, the executive Vice President of drug development at AstraZeneca, who is going to cover the future of the pharmaceutical industry – have we got the right chemistry? So I hope that he is going to really talk about the nature of the industry, how it's been successful and how it might have to change to meet the changing climate out there. There is David Nicholson who is executive Vice President of R&D at Organon, who will be covering the return on investment from the genomics revolution. There have been lots of questions as to whether it has been worthwhile, whether it has solved the problems. I think this will be a really interesting talk, to see how companies are getting returns from their quite considerable investment in genomics

technology. Colin Dollery is going to cover future considerations for drug safety, clearly very topical in the wake of the recent issues surrounding Cox-2 inhibitors. One of the major aspects that have been introduced in response to feedback is the increased importance and use of biologicals as therapeutics – Tim Wells from Serono will give his insight on this. In my view, this will be a very important and significant addition to the programme. I think it will be very welcome to focus some of the sessions on biologicals based on novel targets, how you would optimise biologics, and how you go on to perform clinical trials and register them. Karol Sikora will cover the use of biomarkers in pharmaceutical R&D, again this is a key topic that people are looking at to reduce the risk and increase the success rates in later-stage clinical trials by having very effective and precise markers that are associated with a particular disease.

***'Insight on biologics as emerging therapeutics'******What sort of role do you think posters do or should play in an effective conference such as this one?***

My view – and that of the organising committee – is that posters are an integral part of the conference. We have put a lot more effort in trying to attract posters; we have significantly increased the marketing to try to improve that. We will also give discounts on registration to try to attract poster submissions. There are other benefits on offer to delegates at the conference in addition to discounted registration – poster presenters will qualify for the new investigators programme, for example. If there are gaps in the programme as a result of speaker dropouts, then poster presenters will be first in line to fill those gaps. We also have prizes for the best student poster and best corporate poster

and we also offer entry to an entrepreneurs' lunch on the Tuesday. We are doing our best to try and attract people to it and I think it is a very important part of the meeting. We have a specific site put aside within the exhibition area for the poster displays.

***'[Poster presenters] will qualify for the new investigators programme'******What do you hope that delegates will take away from this conference?***

I think that what the delegates will come away with is an update on the specific areas of science pertaining to them. They'll also, if they make full use of the multi track format, come away with an overview of the industry, so they'll understand the issues facing all aspects of the industry – ranging from research and development to the registration and commercialization of products.

***'They'll be aware of some of the issues surrounding development, regulation and commercialization'***

This will be a fantastic opportunity for networking, so they'll come away with an increased network of people that they can talk to, meet up with and discuss issues. Hopefully they'll come back with fond memories of the conference and of Edinburgh – there is a great social programme associated with it, so we hope that people will remember the meeting for that as well.

***Graham Dixon***

*Senior Vice President,  
Drug Discovery, Galapagos,  
Industriepark Mechelen Noord,  
Generaal De Wittelaan L11 A3,  
B-2800 Mechelen,  
Belgium*