BIOKIT

BIOKIT IS A BARCELONA FIRM THAT DOES RESEARCH INTO REAGENTS FOR CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS, AS WELL AS DEVELOPING AND MANUFACTURING THEM. IT PRESENTED ONE OF THE FIRST PROJECTS IN BIOTECHNOLOGY TO BE APPROVED UNDER THE EUREKA PROGRAMME.

JOAN CUADRAS TECHNICAL DIRECTOR OF BIOKIT

The development of simple, reliable methods for the diagnosis of human diseases is of obvious importance for health. Kits containing sets of reagents and methods for easy diagnosis are one aspect of this. Biokit S.A. is a Barcelona firm that does research into reagents for clinical diagnosis, as well as developing and manufacturing them. It is primarily concerned with sexually related ailments, mental deficiency and aging, and its main products are designed for pregnancy testing, and for diagnosing the rheumatoid factor and various other human diseases, particularly sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and chlamydia.

The products are distributed in kit-form in Spain and are sold in bulk to other countries –Western Europe, the Middle East, the United States and Japan– where distributors include them in kits of their own. The Spanish market is small and the firm is able to finance its research activities through exports. Biokit considers it is working in a world market worth at least 1,000 million pesetas (over $7 million). In the field of medical diagnosis, the quality of the product is of the utmost importance. For this reason, one whole department at Biokit is responsible for quality control through coordination of the different departments and by ensuring that production practices are in line with the particularly strict standards in force in the United States. Biokit undergoes periodic inspections by the U.S. Food and Drugs Administration.

Medical diagnosis is a market in which scientific and technological progress is extremely fast, and in order to maintain growth, firms must keep constantly up to date with new technological discoveries and techniques for diagnosing disease. It is vital to be in touch with the world market in order to keep abreast of new scientific and technical discoveries and observe the movements of the large multinational companies. The very survival of the firm is the main reason why Biokit is so determined to innovate. In a market where technology is constantly changing, it is necessarily dependent on innovation since without it its products would soon become obsolete. At the same time Biokit carries out a programme of growth aimed at extending its range of products. It is currently engaged in virological research to develop ways of diagnosing German measles, hepatitis, the cytomegalovirus and the herpes virus. Another project in bacteriology and parasitology is concerned with the diagnosis of syphilis and toxoplasmosis and the grouping of germs including the streptococcus, meningococcus and staphylococcus.

Biokit has a staff of eighty, with an average age of thirty-two. Eighteen of them work in the Research and Development Department, 70 % are university graduates and many have master's degrees or Ph.D.s. The firm invests 15 % of its sales revenue in research and development. The capital is 100 % Spanish and none of the products are manufactured under licence. Work began in 1980 with research into monoclonal antibodies and since 1985 three researchers have been working on the development of DNA probes. Researchers in Spain face considerably greater obstacles than those in countries with more advanced technology. Foremost among them are the insufficient support private enterprise receives from universities, the lack of research personnel, the low professional standards of many consultants and difficulties in obtaining information. To overcome these problems, Biokit has been cooperating with a number of foreign research organizations, mostly in the United States and France, and has been particularly keen to secure training for its staff in top research centres. A recently launched project involves sending Biokit researchers to do joing research into new products in these foreign centres for periods of one to three years. Certain projects have also got under way with other Spanish laboratories. On 6 November 1985 the EEC Council of Ministers approved the first ten projects to be undertaken within the EUREKA programme. One of these, the development of a kit for direct diagnosis of gonorrhea, was presented by Biokit and PA Technology. The fact that this was one of the first projects in biotechnology to be approved under the new European research programme and the first in which the main participant was a Spanish company is further proof of Biokit's commitment to the industrial applications of new technologies. ■