

A Natural LEADER

The largest company of its kind in Australia, Soho Flordis International is producing clinically proven natural medicines for a world becoming more sceptical of synthetic chemicals.

Images by Scott Ehler

For the past 14 years, Nigel Pollard, CEO of Soho Flordis International (SFI), has been passionately working on bringing to the market natural medicines proven to work. With more and more consumers aware of the effect on their bodies of synthetic pharmaceuticals, the trend in using natural alternatives is rising.

SFI has taken advantage of this increasing awareness and is investing heavily in researching and producing natural alternatives as a solution for common health problems. *The CEO Magazine* spoke to Nigel about how he came to head the company and what he sees for the future of medicine.

***The CEO Magazine:* Could you give an overview of your professional background and a history of Soho Flordis International?**

Nigel: I'm a scientist by training and studied biochemistry in the

UK. I joined the pharmaceutical industry in 1987 and worked in the UK, Germany, and Australia for a pharmaceutical company called BASF Pharma, part of the world's largest chemical company. The pharmaceutical industry was, and is today, struggling to develop new products. So towards the end of my time in the pharmaceutical area, I was looking for new opportunities for growth and became very interested in clinically proven natural medicines.

Proven natural medicine is an area of huge potential. The idea is that natural medicines with proper evidence should be used by medical doctors as just another, probably better, solution to common health complaints. While working in the pharmaceutical industry, in 1999–2000, we decided to bring these proven natural medicine products to healthcare professionals. We built a subsidiary company called Flordis to do this. Then in 2001 the parent company sold the pharmaceutical arm and there was

an opportunity for a management buyout of Flordis. Three courageous friends and I got together and bought the company and went off on our own. Since then, Flordis has expanded into the global business we are today.

A major milestone in our growth happened in 2009 when we joined forces with the Tan family, who own a pharmaceutical company in Indonesia called Soho Group. Now Flordis and the Tan family have joined forces to create Soho Flordis International.

What drew you towards natural medicines?

When I was first in the pharmaceutical industry, I thought natural medicines were just hocus pocus. But living in Germany for five years opened my mind as I found out that doctors there were actually prescribing natural medicine products, and these prescriptions were subsidised by the government. I found this acceptance of natural medicines >



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very interesting and that there must be something behind it. I had a look at some of the research that's been published and was amazed at the extensive clinical trial data supporting some selected natural medical products.

Natural medicine products that have been clinically trialled have two enormous advantages over synthetic competitors. The first advantage is that most diseases are caused by multiple factors; they're not caused just by one chemical abnormality. Natural medicines have lots of components and so they have multiple biological actions. This is a more logical solution to treating multifactorial disease than a synthetic chemical drug, which usually does just one thing.

The second advantage of natural medicines is that innovation for synthetic medicines is driven by gaining a monopoly for many years through patents. The innovation is protected because it's a new substance the planet has never seen before. The problem is that you have to do a lot of expensive testing to prove that it's safe before it can be used on humans. With natural products, like herbal medicines, we've evolved with the plants for millions of years, so if they were very toxic then we would already know about it. It doesn't cost billions to bring a new clinically proven natural medicine product to the market like it does with synthetic medicine. At SFI, we believe that our specific products need to be made to the highest standards and tested in clinical trials, just like synthetic medicines.

What has been your biggest challenge as CEO?

The biggest challenge for a pioneering company like SFI is recruiting the right people to the team. Because we're doing something that hasn't been

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done before—building a global brand with clinically proven natural medicines for mainstream medicine—it's hard to get talented people with past experience. So we have to blend skills from different industries, and select entrepreneurial talent. We have now assembled a great team, and getting that blend right has been critical.

The second big challenge is in developing long-term strategic relationships. It takes a long time to gain people's trust, especially when you're a new brand or a new concept in a field like health. There are a lot of false claims made in our sector and a lot of miracle cures that come and go. Building trust and building these long-term relationships is really important.

What are the values of the company and how do you instil them in staff?

We have four values at the company: trust and respect, entrepreneurialism, multicultural and family values. We assess our performance delivering against these values in our performance reviews and regularly reward team members who excel at demonstrating these values. We also use those values in the recruitment process; in Australia

we use a company called 4C for targeted recruitment. They know what we're looking for and our values as a company, and that helps us to screen people to see if they will fit in culturally with what we're looking for. Candidates go through a rigorous process before they can get into the final interview stage. We think successful candidates are happier with us, as we share these values and we all believe in what we are doing.

Why do you think Soho Flordis is the biggest company of its kind in Australia?

We are different from other companies in Australia due to our commitment to serving health professionals and their patients with products with specific evidence. We have reached the size we are through the commitment and financial support from the Tan family—we have made a lot of investments in acquiring businesses around the world. We bought a product and two companies in the US and a company in Switzerland. This visionary investment has given us a big platform to grow.

We believe that people, and the healthcare professionals caring for them, are looking for better evidence for natural medicine

products. They are looking for something natural, but they don't really know which brands to choose. We can show them where the product comes from, right from the seed to the patient. We control the whole supply chain and have proven that the product works in a clinical trial. It means that when you see one of our products on the shelf, we can prove that it actually does what it says. We think this is the future for natural medicines.

How does Soho Flordis work with suppliers and retail partners to ensure success?

At the end of the day, success needs partnerships. For example, we work closely with key retail partners, like Terry White in Australia. Places like Terry White provide a service to their customers, so if a customer comes

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in and asks for a natural health solution, then somebody is able to explain the differences between the products. I think it's really important that we can show people how our products work and answer questions about what side effects can be expected.

And we do that with our other partners in our supply chain, such as with the growers of the original plant material. We give our growers very specific quality requirements that have to be met, and in return for that they get a long-term contract with us. For example, we are the leading company in the world with clinically proven ginseng. Ginseng takes many years to reach maturity, so in order to prepare the land and plant it, growers need a really strong commitment that they're going to be able to sell what they produce years down the line. By working together with us, they get surety that they can recoup their investments and we get the quality to reach our standard, so it's an absolute partnership.

What does the future look like for Soho Flordis International and for the industry?

We see a big future in doctors and health professionals around the world recommending specific natural medicine products with clinical evidence. We believe that meeting these needs is a huge opportunity. In terms of the industry as a whole, there are a lot of challenges to keep up with the increasing expectations of the market. In every country, there are going to be higher and higher standards for quality and more scrutiny of the evidence behind the claims of natural medicine products. It's also going to be more expensive for smaller companies to stay in the market in the longer term. For bigger companies without evidence on their specific products, they will have to change their business model. I think it will be tough for some and a big opportunity for others. •

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"It adds up to less risk"

Nigel Pollard
Nigel Pollard, CEO
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