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BUSINESS

Biotech boss takes clinical approach to acquiring unloved assets

Poolbeg Pharma's Jeremy Skillington is on the hunt for more revenue-generating deals ahead of a lucrative New York listing

JON IHLE



The first thing to know about Poolbeg Pharma is that it was founded by Cathal Friel.

The well-known financier seems to have a script for funding, developing and ultimately selling the companies he founds via Raglan Capital, the private equity vehicle that has launched five initial public offerings in the past decade.

The Raglan way involves getting private investors to finance the rehabilitation of an unloved but promising asset – so-called orphans – floating it and using the capital available on the public markets to make strategic acquisitions. The final stage is a big sale that provides a lucrative exit for the original investors, whereupon the cycle begins again.

Poolbeg is halfway through this cycle now and Jeremy Skillington's job as chief executive is to see it all the way through. The experienced operator was a key figure in the €380 million sale of Luke O'Neill's Inflazome to Roche back in 2020 and Friel is counting on his dealmaking chops to pay off once again.

The company, as he says, is "doing an Amryt" – a reference to the \$1.5 billion sale of Friel's last pharmaceutical company to Italy's Chiesi in 2023, a deal that resulted in early backers tripling their money.

Three key Amryt executives have been parachuted into Poolbeg this year,

beefing up the business development, clinical operations and legal side of the management team. The company is clearly getting ready for a slate of deals, with the ultimate goal of backing into a listing on New York's Nasdaq stock exchange.

"Cathal's a visionary," Skillington says. "He said, 'Let's do this again.' That's the stated goal."

Friel approached him in early 2021 as the Inflazome transaction was closing. Poolbeg was still a private company then, but Friel was eyeing a listing on London's Aim index, which happened in July that year, raising £25 million, and wanted an experienced business head on board.

At that point the company was still called Open Orphan. Like many pharma start-ups it had some promising research, focusing on diseases with high unmet need, and a human viral clinical trial arm, which was spun out on Euronext Dublin as hVivo, another outfit in Friel's stable.

With the investor story simplified, Skillington is on the hunt for revenue-generating assets. Poolbeg is doing things in parallel for the moment. The company is developing its own pipeline of drugs – primarily to treat cytokine release storms experienced by patients undergoing immunotherapy – and looking for companies to buy.

"We are looking at Nasdaq companies that maybe are faltering," he says. "They might have interesting pipelines or products, maybe they need extra capital."

The past few years have been challenging for life sciences companies, meaning there are many businesses that are making money but have low valuations. Skillington's pitch to potential target companies is a European arm with knowledge and



ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

experience combining with the depth of American capital markets.

"It's a well-worn path and we've got people in place who have done it," he says. "The company is going to reverse in and it's going to drive value in the pipeline. Sometimes the companies might have raised a significant amount of cash already and things have turned downwards. So they're sitting on cash but with-out products."

Skillington says Poolbeg has done due diligence on a few targets, but none has panned out. He's not in a rush. The company is sitting on £12 million in cash of its own, which will see it through another few years at current burn rates.

But clearly the pieces are coming together with the management refresh.

Skillington, of course, didn't start out in the boardroom. A biochemist by training, he started his education at the Cork Institute of Technology, in his hometown, studying food science – "not for me" – before heading up to Galway for a degree in chemistry, which then rolled into a PhD.

A postdoctoral research opportunity at the University of California San Francisco lured him across the Atlantic to a hotbed of pharma R&D.

Things accelerated in his career when his girlfriend joined him in San Francisco. The move prompted a re-evaluation of where science was taking him.

"So Jen got a visa to come out and we got engaged, got married and had the kids in California," he says. "But it was kind of important when Jen was pregnant with our first kid that postdoc salaries aren't sufficient for a standard of living – certainly not in San Francisco."

"So I was looking around at the time and I was very much interested in the business side of biotech."

Skillington had done some internships in technology transfer and an accounting course – "very foreign to me" – but was far from a businessman. He needed a bridge from one domain to the other.

At the time Genentech, now a subsidiary of Roche, was looking to hire scientists for business development roles – essentially bringing in new products through collaborations and acquisitions. Skillington interviewed.

"Business development is the source of external innovation," he says. "They offered me a job just before my son was born. Perfect timing. You're learning about deal work and licensing, negotiation, financial modelling. It was terrific. I had a great time there."

From there Skillington proceeded mainly, it appears, by impressing influential people at companies through the pharma and biotech sectors. Along the way he co-founded and led a start-up of his own. One potential investor liked Skillington enough to offer him a gilded position as "entrepreneur in residence", a job that had him splitting time between Dublin and Dusseldorf.

But it was a call from a friendly life sciences venture capitalist that really changed things for Skillington.

"Jeremy, we're starting a new company with Luke O'Neill, called Inflazome – would you be interested?" he recalls the pitch. "Luke is very funny, very persuasive. So basically for about a year I had a kind of job-share."

He says there was "fantastic drive" in the company and before long Big Pharma was sniffing around. Skillington's relationships in Roche, from his time in Genentech, came in handy. "It's a relationship business, like most businesses are," he says.

But this was put to the test when, right in the middle of negotiations, Covid struck, meaning face-to-face meetings were put on hold. "It actually worked quite well," he says. "Nobody went on holidays. Everyone was available. We got the deal terms signed in August 2020 and stayed on until March 2021. That's when Cathal Friel called."

So now Skillington splits his attention between Poolbeg's promising in-house drug development and sniffing out deals in the US.

Its potential blockbuster is a molecule called POLB 001. In essence this orally administered drug stops the debilitating side-effects of cancer therapies, making them more accessible and freeing up scarce hospital resources. The same molecule is also being developed as a flu treatment targeting the body's inflammatory response – what makes the flu feel so uniquely miserable.

Jeremy Skillington left the lab for the business world once his first child was on the way

“Jeremy, we're starting a new company with Luke O'Neill, called Inflazome – would you be interested?”

"Your immune system is freaking out a bit," Skillington explains. "That creates problems not just for the patient but for the healthcare system, because patients have to stay in hospital to manage the cytokine storm."

Perhaps an even sexier potential product is what is scientifically known as an oral GLP-1R agonist but colloquially would be called oral Ozempic. It's early days but Poolbeg is working with Anabio Technologies in Cork to develop a diabetes and diet drug that patients can take in a pill rather than regular injections, like they have to with Ozempic and Wegovy – two Novo Nordisk drugs that have taken the market by storm in the past year.

But a key step on the road to developing these promising treatments fully will be the access to capital and the shop window afforded by the Nasdaq. And the plan is to get it done in the next year or so.

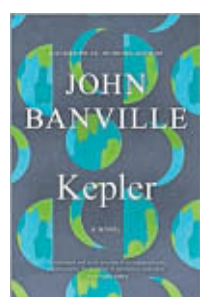
"Nasdaq is the place to be," Skillington says. "A lot of work has been done since [the IPO]. It was a good starting point. We've done well enough. We'd like to be pushing forward."

ALAMY



THE LIFE OF JEREMY SKILLINGTON

Age: 53
Lives: Howth, Co Dublin
Family: married to Jennifer with two children, Jack, 21, and Kate, 19
Education: North Monastery Secondary School, Cork; PhD in biochemistry at NUI Galway; postdoctoral research at UC San Francisco
Favourite film: *The Holdovers*. "I rarely watch TV but it's mainly football."
Favourite book: *Kepler* by John Banville. "I see him regularly enough in Howth. I really enjoy his books. I go from literature to running to science. That's my three kinds of books."



The Holdovers, top, and John Banville's Kepler keep Skillington entertained

WORKING DAY
I'm in the office pretty much every day. I grind my teeth driving through Fairview in the morning. Obviously on the phone before that. We've got team meetings, external calls. I do a lot of the IR [investor relations] and PR work, too. I try to get out by 6pm for dinner at 7pm.

DOWNTIME
It depends on whether I'm training for a race or not [Skillington runs marathons]. I play a bit of golf as well, but not as often as I'd like. And then cycling of late. I always feel like you have to break a sweat. Or just vegging on the couch for a football match. That's fine as well.