



# Biotech Daily's CEO interview

March 4, 2008

## LEON SERRY: RETIREMENT STARTS WITH A 12-HOUR DAY

The wiry, white-haired doyen of Australian biotechnology quickly finishes a complex domestic organizational matter – booking a flight for several people – before turning his attention to the future of the sector. He has a plan. He has many plans.

Leon Serry is a deeply private person, avoiding some questions about his childhood, while happily boasting that in 1960 he was the youngest qualified accountant in Australia.

Born in Newcastle where his father ran the Government parachute factory, the family moved to Melbourne and he went to school at Elwood Central School, later living in Melbourne's leafy but not necessarily wealthy Glen Iris. Leon left Camberwell High School at 15 to join Nicholas Aspro as a cost accountant.

He studied accountancy part-time at Swinburne Tech (as it was then) qualifying at 19. He also did his Matriculation (Year 12) in one year of night school. Despite winning both a place in Law at the University of Melbourne and a Commonwealth Scholarship, he discontinued after six months "because I ran out of funds".

"I always wanted to be a lawyer," Leon says.

Instead he joined the Leighton construction company and raised £A500,000 when he listed the company on the ASX in 1962.

In 1969 Leon joined bankers Ralli Brothers run by Isaac Wolfson, the power behind the British mail order company Great Universal Stores. He was appointed to the board of Leighton and the Australian division of Ralli and was company secretary to both companies.

His next challenge was running his own management company but it wasn't satisfying.

"I was never happy with what I was doing," Leon says. "Then I read the Time magazine article on Interferon as a potential treatment for cancer. I'd already made a lot of money and wanted to give something back to the community and that's when I started Circadian.

“I went to Monash University and found melatonin for jetlag and sleep disorders. Universities don't have a bent for commercialization, but you have to get funding for science - and to cure diseases you need commercialization.”

Leon says that in 1984 when Circadian was formed and 1985 when the company listed on the ASX, no one understood the fledgling biotechnology industry. “There were no market analysts, no biotech analysts.”

To succeed in biotechnology Leon says you need the “three Ps”. “You have got to be passionate; you have to have perseverance; and you have to have patience. You need those three in an industry where your timelines are 10 years as a minimum. You have competition developing similar drugs, there are patent risks, and the drug can fail. They are huge risks. And you need the funding.

“Still, it's exciting. But the rewards can be really great because you can treat disease and make money for your shareholders.”

It's when we turn to Leon Serry's future that Biotech Daily became aware of the doyen's rapid-fire imagination. Leon is a volcano of ideas.

He is a consultant to Circadian but has ideas on water and energy conservation. He has two 2500 litre water tanks at his home and they are always full. He decries the waste of water both domestically and by industry.

“There's got to be more incentive. There's so much water. We have to decrease the use of petrol by cars and increase public transport. I have a lot of ideas and I'm going to get involved. I want to come up with ideas for energy and water conservation,” Leon Serry says.

“And I may go onto a major non-biotech board as a non-executive director.”

“What I want to do overseas and in Australia is to be involved in promoting the industry, advocate better ASX reporting and improve the status of the biotech industry.

“One of my ideas is that the Federal Government should give a 100 percent tax deduction for subscribers to capital being raised for a phase III trial. When a company gets to the end of a phase II study it has a 65-70 percent chance of success. But if you licence out to a major pharmaceutical company you don't employ anyone. You don't encourage an Australian pharmaceutical industry. The tax deduction would create a pharmaceuticals industry and bring down the cost of drugs from overseas. It would boost the whole sector. And it won't cost the Government much because there won't be more than two or three companies in phase III at a time. And in return, the companies should pay a royalty to Government. I'll be trying to get that going.”

Leon Serry's brand new, high-tech wooden desk is already covered with his famous yellow post-its, several the result of a diversion in our conversation on conservation.

"I left Circadian on Friday, set up this office on Sunday and was in here at 7.30am on Monday. My wife expected me to be home early, but on my first day I got home at 7pm."

"Put it this way, I'm not retiring."