

BUSINESS

Pests killer targets pick of the crop

Nicola Mitchell is battling all the way — including in courts — to make Life Scientific a bigger player in its field



Nicola Mitchell is on a winning streak. Over the past four years, the founder and chief executive of Life Scientific, a Dublin maker of generic agricultural pesticides, has won four administrative court cases and one civil lawsuit against regulators in Germany over delays in granting licences for her company’s products.

In each case, Life Scientific challenged regulators, including the German consumer protection and food safety watchdog BVL and the environmental agency UBA, over how they had interpreted the nuanced language of EU licensing rules, which made it more time-consuming and difficult to enter the market.

Germany – which happens to be the home of Bayer Crop Science and BASF, two of the three largest pesticides multinationals, the other being Syngenta – is a key battleground for Life Scientific. Over two years the company has launched 10 products in the market, which has proven profitable and generated €10m in annual sales. “If we don’t step up and fight, even as a little voice, we get the future that we don’t fight for,” says Mitchell.

This year a German civil court awarded the company €3m in damages associated with the delays. Mitchell has yet to receive a cheque because the payout is pending approval from an auditor. But the cash is not all that important to her. “I might never see the money, but it was never about the money. It was behavioural change that I was looking for,” she says. “We’ve seen that now.”

Mitchell is also aware that the legal battle is far from over, with 22 cases continuing in the country. But she is buoyed by Life Scientific’s successes. “When you go to the courts in Germany, they’re independent of politics, so you get justice. Isn’t that a great beacon for the world to know? Isn’t it worth doing it for that alone?”

This week Mitchell is hoping for another win. She is one of the shortlisted candidates for the EY Entrepreneur of the Year awards, which take place virtually on Thursday. To win would be an “absolute dream” – and she is in it to raise Life Scientific’s profile.

“I’m not doing it for Nicola,” she says. “I’m happier under a rock, but there comes a day when you have to stand up and be counted. It’s all about the team and this wonderful project. We’re doing stuff that farmers need us to do and we’re really bringing more cost-effective inputs to farmers who badly need it.”

Speaking via video call from her home in south Dublin, where she quarantined after a recent trip to Frankfurt, Mitchell practically bursts through the computer screen. But she wasn’t always this way.

A proud Cork woman, Mitchell describes her younger self as “a blank canvas”, lacking in confidence and with few expectations from life. “I took everything on board as if it was the Bible and gospel from those around me,” she says.

Her father, a chemist by trade and musician by night who once played with Seán Ó Riada, was a big influence. “Dad’s passion was music and creativity and he was a comedian. He worked for a multinational, a corporate. For him, it really was a fur-lined mousetrap. It didn’t spark him.”

Conscious that Europe was gearing towards a single market, Mitchell was encouraged from a young age to learn a second language. She travelled to a family near Lyon each year to speak French. Having finished school, she was given the choice of pursuing law or chemistry. Eager to follow in her father’s footsteps, she chose the latter.

Though her father helped shape her career path, it was the women in Mitchell’s family that were “a real force” in her life. Her maternal grandmother, a daughter of one of Michael Collins’s associates, came from a privileged background, but lost her fortune after marrying a gambler.

“Granny believed education was a religion,” says Mitchell. For that reason, all but two of her grandmother’s six children went to university. Though Mitchell’s mother was one of the two to be denied a third-level education, she had an entrepreneurial flair and set up a business designing wedding dresses.



LORRAINE O’SULLIVAN

Mitchell was particularly inspired by her aunt Vera Delaney, a kidney doctor and the mother of Samantha Power, former US ambassador to the UN. “I remember hearing stories of Vera all the way. She got offered the top job in a Manhattan hospital, the most prestigious of jobs. She refused it because she would lose contact with her patients. That really resonated. That, to me, was integrity.”

Having graduated from University College Cork with undergraduate and master’s degrees, Mitchell got a job with agrochemical maker Barclay Crop Protection in Dublin. She was underqualified – the company wanted applicants with PhDs – but the owner, Philip Sheridan, liked the cut of Mitchell’s jib. “From day one I got to understand very quickly that I love working. I love being productive, the problem-solving, doing something bigger and being part of something bigger and achieving great things,” says Mitchell.

Her recruitment coincided with the introduction of statutory legislation for the licensing of agrochemicals in Ireland and the UK. That greatly increased the workload to get a product to market and created a new industry of required expertise.

“[Barclay] was a sink-or-swim, wonderful environment with a very generous owner, because he really understood the future was this ability to access markets through regulation. You always had R&D. This was a whole new frontier and he knew this was the future and the critical success factor in the industry. [Sheridan] was very visionary in that regard.”

After 10 years at Barclay, Mitchell decided to strike out on her own and set up Life Scientific in 1995, initially as a contract research organisation. Based out of what would become NovaUCD, the company specialised in providing outsourced research and development, and took on the cumbersome task of helping multinationals make their own generics. “They were set up for new molecules and we were set up for existing molecules.”

Relying heavily on equipment provided by UCD, Life Scientific was able to access technology that was normally available only to large companies. It also received “good laboratory practice” certification through the university.

Mitchell has Europe and North and South America in her expansion sights

“My mother was pleased with it [the treatment for vine weevils] because it’s the thing that killed her camellias

As the company grew, so too did the opportunity for it to start manufacturing its own generic products. “We knew that in order to scale and to be exponential, you needed to have a products business, not a service business,” says Mitchell.

Life Scientific set about developing a method of reverse-engineering off-patent products. It was a difficult task, but Mitchell thought that if the company could precisely reconstruct the chemicals found in big-brand pesticides for its generic versions, it could speed up the regulatory approval process. By producing a product that was identical at a molecular level, there would be no issues of safety, efficacy or quality.

“I’ve always wanted to reverse-engineer the equivalent of the Coca-Cola recipe. It’s deliberately made complex, I think, by multinationals who are the oligopoly. They create entry barriers and build fortress walls by using patents, legal barriers, regulatory barriers and technical barriers. I was always really attracted to making things simple.”

By 2012, Life Scientific had launched its first product, which treated vine weevils – a common pest. “My mother was pleased with it because it’s the thing

that killed her camellias by eating its roots. You don’t know your camellia is dying until it’s dead.”

From then on the company started to grow rapidly. Turnover rose from €2m to €60m today, and it launched more than 50 products. “It all happened very fast after 20 years.”

In 2014, Mitchell sold half of the company’s shares to InVivo, a large farming co-operative group in France that represented 300,000 farmers, for an undisclosed sum. With a desire to work more directly with farmers, Mitchell sold the stake to gain market access and retained control over governance.

“We took 50% and more market share straight off [after the sale]. So it really propelled the business. Now, France is less than half of the business because we’ve evolved from it, but it was a really important pillar.”

As well as targeting Germany and France, Life Scientific’s generic products are sold in Ireland, the UK and Spain. The company has started to build a business in Italy and is looking to enter eastern Europe, making submissions to seek regulatory approval in Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Romania.

Though she acknowledges that Life Scientific is a minnow compared with the big three, Mitchell says the company serves as a “little voice and reminder” that the multinationals’ raison d’être is the development of new molecules.

“The multinational will present something as being new, which is just incremental innovation – and that’s the stuff we can match. We don’t have to wait for patents to expire. There are 10, 20 years of inertia when things don’t happen because generic companies did not have the science... There are a lot of untapped discoveries to be made [by multinationals], I’m sure, that will make for a better-fed and more sustainable planet.”

As well as making further inroads in Europe, Life Scientific, which moved to a new €2.5m headquarters in Dublin’s Bel-field Office Park last year, plans to expand into North and South America and has made early steps in entering Paraguay.

“We’re 82 people and we think it can really allow us to scale in the way we want to, which is to [generate revenues of] €250m in the next five years and [achieve] a €1bn valuation,” says Mitchell. “It’s not rocket science – we just have to do it.”

THE LIFE OF NICOLA MITCHELL

VITAL STATISTICS
Age: 55
Home: Monkstown, Dublin
Education: undergraduate and master’s in chemistry at UCC; MBA sponsored by Barclay Crop Protection
Family: partner of Enda O’Coineen, mother to Anna, Louis and Joe
Favourite book: The Little Soul and the Sun, by Neale Donald Walsch
Favourite film: I don’t like anything horrid, I love a happy ending. I liked The Man in the Hat, pictured



WORKING DAY
I run at 6.30am and work from 7.30am to 7pm. I don’t work at the weekends but I might take a few notes when I’m not thinking about things.

DOWNTIME
Pilates, walking and travelling when I’m able to.

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University College Dublin (Ref: 012756)

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Application procedure:

Applicants should apply online, attaching a copy of their CV and a letter explaining their vision for the role, to Lansdowne Executive Search at:
sean.mcdonagh@lansdownesearch.ie

Enquires in relation to this role can be directed to:

Seán McDonagh, Partner, Lansdowne Executive Search
Email: sean.mcdonagh@lansdownesearch.ie / Phone: + 353 87 796 1062



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