A Clear Picture for Prevention

Selling contrast agents for medical imaging, Guerbet Korea continues its quest to provide innovative solutions

As a maker of contrast agents, substances that enhance the contrast of elements in medical imaging, it’s no wonder the French pharmaceutical company Guerbet enjoys doing business in Korea. After all, you need good imaging technology and good doctors to get good scans. Korea has both.

“The medical community and radiologists are of a world-class level,” said Mathieu Elie, General Manager of Guerbet Korea. “Hospitals are very well equipped in terms of machinery. So with a lot of machines and a lot of examinations, that makes it interesting for us.”

In this environment, Guerbet Korea has become one of the fastest-growing subsidiaries of Guerbet, with sales nearly doubling in the last five years and reaching KRW 19 billion in 2012. Established in 1998, Guerbet Korea faced a rocky first eight years but began rebuilding operations in 2006. Today a staff of 35, two pharmacists and medical representatives nationwide sell contrast agents in three major categories — MRI and X-ray in the diagnostic field, and Lipiodol in the field of interventional radiology and theranostics.

Guerbet Korea sells an MRI product called Dotarem and the X-ray contrast agent Xenetix, which is used to explore pathologies and in particular for the central nervous system, digestive tract, musculoskeletal system and vascular system.

In the interventional radiology and theranostics field, the company sells Lipiodol, the pioneering contrast agent discovered by Marcel Guerbet in 1901 and which is used today mainly in the embolization of malignant tumors (primary cancers of the liver or liver metastasis) or benign conditions (arteriovenous malformations).

The company also recently launched in Korea the Scanbag, a biodegradable, pharmaceutical-grade plastic bag that replaces the glass vial packaging for contrast agents, thereby reducing medical waste. In the next couple years, Guerbet Korea will also start selling an innovative injector for CT that will serve as a safer and more eco-friendly alternative to the current syringe injectors.

“We have a social mission for the sake of public health. We are doing our best to provide healthcare solutions to all our patients and also our Korean patients,” said Elie, who joined the Korea subsidiary in 2007.

Guerbet’s products play a key role in interventional radiology, a promising and growing field of medicine in which doctors operate on patients with the use of scanners and contrast agents with minimal invasive procedures.

“Korea is at the frontier of this new field of medicine. Actually this field of medicine is quite old, but recently it has expanded quite a lot, because of the increase in precision of the X-ray and also of the medicine and things like that,” said Elie.

Guerbet Korea’s customers are mainly big hospitals, including Samsung Medical Center, Asan Medical Center, Seoul National University Hospital and the Yonsei University Health System.

In addition to top-quality equipment, Guerbet Korea is also drawn to Korea’s strengths in research and development and well-trained doctors with whom the company can partner on clinical trials. The company has conducted clinical studies in Korea on Guerbet’s products to gain new indications, to have Dotarem approved in the United States and to solve medical questions — like what the probability is of someone with type 2 diabetes who has suffered a non-major cardiac event called a silent infarction having a potentially deadly heart attack. The idea is to avoid surgery whenever possible for the comfort of the patient and reduce healthcare costs.

“Our aim is to improve the prognosis and quality of life for the patient. That’s the job, that’s what we do,” said Elie. “That’s why I’m waking up every morning.”

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Did you know?

- Guerbet Group founder Marcel Guerbet developed an iodized oil called Lipiodol in 1901. After its opacifying properties were discovered in 1918, it became the world’s first iodized contrast agent.
- Guerbet Group provided 19 million doses of contrast agents last year.