

Case Study

Why Early-Stage Inhalation Innovators Need a Different Kind of CDMO.

How GMPharma Consulting found a partner that combined scientific rigour, flexibility and fast decision-making to break the mould of working with large CDMOs.

For innovators developing inhaled medicines, early-stage development can be both the most critical and the most challenging phase. Before significant investment is committed, companies need to answer a fundamental question: Will this work?

According to Helen Muirhead, Founder of GMPharma Consulting and former Head of Respiratory Products at GSK, many traditional development models aren't designed to help companies answer that question efficiently.

The Challenge

Having spent more than 40 years in the pharmaceutical industry, including three decades at GSK spanning formulation development, respiratory products and commercial manufacturing, Helen has worked with numerous CDMOs throughout her career.

While many offer extensive capabilities, she believes there remains a significant gap in the market for early-stage innovators.

"Many CDMOs are geared towards larger programmes. They can be too rigid and too expensive when companies simply need affordable feasibility work to determine whether a concept is technically viable."

For inhalation products in particular, the cost of failure can be substantial. Early development decisions can have long-term consequences for formulation performance, manufacturability and future commercialisation.

As a result, companies need access to expert guidance, practical development support and robust data before making significant investments.

Looking for More Than a Supplier

When selecting a development partner, Helen was looking for more than technical capability alone.

Key requirements included:

- Deep respiratory expertise
- Fast decision-making
- Honest scientific feedback
- A willingness to challenge assumptions
- Confidence in future scale-up
- A collaborative approach built on trust

"You need people who will tell it how it is. The best partners challenge your thinking and help you make better decisions."

Having assessed numerous CDMOs within the respiratory sector, Upperton stood out not only because of its technical expertise, but also because of its willingness to take on exploratory work designed to establish whether a concept could succeed.

A Different Approach

Helen believes Upperton's approach differs from many traditional CDMO relationships.

Rather than operating as a transactional supplier, the team worked collaboratively, maintaining open communication and ensuring key decisions were guided by scientific evidence.

"Everyone talked openly and the discussions were always led by the science and the data."

From the outset, there was a strong sense of partnership.

"We felt part of the team rather than an external client. Even working remotely, we remained closely involved throughout the programme."

The ability to have direct, open conversations with technical experts helped accelerate decision-making and ensured challenges could be addressed quickly as the programme progressed.



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Confidence Through Expertise

One of the factors that impressed Helen most was the depth of capability across the organisation. Whether interacting with project managers, formulation scientists or laboratory teams, the same technical confidence and engagement was evident.

"Nobody was ever phased by the technical discussions. There was real depth of knowledge throughout the organisation and that gave us confidence in the decisions being made."

Importantly, that expertise helped support one of the most critical objectives of early-stage development: proving whether a concept was likely to succeed before committing further investment.

The combination of scientific rigour and practical decision-making provided confidence not only in the early development phase, but also in the pathway towards future scale-up.

Built on Trust

For Helen, trust is one of the most important factors when outsourcing pharmaceutical development.

"You need to know that everyone is bought into the molecule and committed to the outcome."

That trust was built through transparency, scientific integrity and confidence in the quality of the work being delivered.

"In pharmaceutical development, you have to rely on the science, the processes and the data. I had complete confidence in Upperton's processes and data."

Supporting the Next Generation of Innovators

Helen believes this approach is particularly valuable for start-ups and small-to-mid-sized biotech companies, where resources are limited and every development decision matters.

By combining specialist expertise, flexible ways of working and a focus on generating meaningful feasibility data, Upperton helps organisations make informed decisions earlier and reduce development risk.

"Their technical expertise, openness and willingness to work collaboratively gave us confidence from day one. We felt part of the team throughout, and I trusted the quality of the science, the processes and the data completely."

Interview with Helen Muirhead
Founder, GMPharma Consulting