Interview: Noel Heaney – General Manager, Bristol-Myers-Squibb (BMS) Biologics, Ireland



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Noel Heaney, general manager of BMS Biologics Ireland, provides an overview of BMS in Ireland, its exciting new USD 900 million biologics facility in Cruiserath, their innovative HR programs and his five-year-vision for BMS Biologics in Ireland.

BMS has a strong heritage in Ireland dating back to 1964 when it became one of the first API manufacturers here, and recently it announced a significant investment of USD 900 million to build a biologics facility here. Can you first provide an overview of BMS' existing footprint in Ireland?

BMS Ireland has a proud heritage in the manufacture and delivery of medicines to patients. In 1964, we set up our initial facility on a 17-acre site in Swords, north of Dublin, with an initial investment of GBP 1 million and 30 employees. The facility was one of the first of its kind in Ireland and among the first foreign direct investments in a manufacturing operation by a U.S. pharmaceutical company focused on the export market. Since that time, the pharma industry in Ireland has been on an exciting journey and has evolved into an important part of the Irish economy.

The growth of our own operations mirrors that. Our Swords operations have continued to expand over the years and the site is now also home to BMS Commercial, Medical and Treasury operations in Ireland. In 2004, our Cruiserath API manufacturing facility near Blanchardstown, Dublin, opened.

Our External Manufacturing organization, which manages the external contractors we partner with for small molecule manufacturing, is also based in Dublin, and they also have an operation in Shannon that began operations back in 1966.

The latest addition is the biologics manufacturing facility currently under construction at our Cruiserath location. In 2014, we announced the closure of the small-molecule operations, which made way for this exciting project. When completed, the 125-acre facility will add approximately 400 highly skilled employees to the existing 550 employees in Ireland, almost doubling our presence! Several thousand jobs will also be created during the construction phase.

This evolution of BMS Ireland is very much in line with our overall company's evolution. The company you see today is the product of a BioPharma strategy developed in 2007 to combine the resources, scale and capability of a pharmaceutical company with the speed and focus on innovation of the biotech industry. Our company's growing biologics portfolio and the impact of this on our Ireland operations is a result of this strategy.

You moved from API Operations to Biologics in March 2016 overseeing the construction of the new biologics facility. What was the specific mandate you were given?

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My key function as the General Manager will be to run the facility when construction is complete and the site is operational. At the moment, the site is under construction and the "project delivery team" overseeing that is led by my colleague Michael Furlong, executive director, Cruiserath Biologics. One of the key learnings we have had from prior start-ups is that the earlier we can get the "operational team" in place and integrated with the "project delivery team", the better. This leads to a more seamless transition from project to operations, and in particular allows the transfer and retention of critical facility, systems and equipment knowledge which is invaluable for the operations team. My focus therefore has been on recruiting the Operations team as early as possible, building an effective start-up plan, and ensuring that the Operations team is fully integrated with the Project team. Michael and I work very closely together to ensure that happens – it is a collaborative effort across our teams. The "operational team" will be involved in supporting the commissioning, qualification and validation process for the facility rather than just accepting a handover after it is completed and the knowledge gained there will be invaluable for us.

In terms of the biologics facility, when completed, the Large Scale Cell Culture (LSCC) building will house six 15,000-liter bioreactors and the associated harvest and purification areas. There will also be separate buildings for central utilities, warehouse, and an additional building for our laboratory,

office and canteen.

The real excitement surrounds the product that this facility will produce, which is Opdivo®, (nivolumab), an Immuno-Oncology treatment. Immuno-Oncology medicines are transforming the way cancer is treated and Bristol-Myers Squibb is playing a leading role in this. The opportunity to deliver a drug that will give new hope to patients is at the heart of the excitement that emanates from this site. This is something we cannot emphasize enough and forms really the raison d'être for this facility.

With this state-of-the-art facility, a critical element is a skilled workforce. One of Ireland's main draws for pharma companies is its talented and experienced workforce, but we have heard of a gap in supply. How is BMS attracting and retaining people of the highest calibre?

There are several elements to this. One involves raising the profile of our company in Ireland. We have a communications program to tell stakeholders about our mission, the promise of this facility, and what it is like to work at BMS. We have advertised in national media, attended recruitment fairs such as "Career Zoo" and have hosted specific BMS career days. We are also actively involved in visits to all the relevant third level educational colleges to ensure all graduates are aware of our opportunities. We have also worked with Silicon Republic, a technology and innovation online publication, where we publish interviews with employees who explain what it is like to work here.

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Another innovative thing we have done is to develop re-training and cross-training programs. An excellent example of this is the approach we took with some of our own BMS employees. About one fifth of the employees who used to work in the small molecule API manufacturing plant at Cruiserath decided to stay with us and went through an innovative cross-training program we developed. We first sent them to the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training (NIBRT) to embark on a bespoke program for three weeks, and then we transferred them to our biologics facility in Devens, Massachusetts in the U.S. for periods ranging from six to 12 months, along with their families. There they were integrated into the operations team to put their training to work and continue the learning process. Some of those colleagues have now completed their training and are now back in Cruiserath working on operation start-up plans. This was a significant investment by the company and a great example of our company's commitment to develop our people

We have also worked with a program called Skillnets where potential employees get eight weeks training at NIBRT and then do a work placement with us for three months. These are just some of the ways we are working to recruit and train our assets, including those people that may not seem like immediate candidates for the industry per se.

Ultimately, we believe that our people are our biggest asset. This is not just something we say; we also back it up with significant investment in the continuous development of our employees. We believe this is also key to staff retention. I was asked recently about what our approach was to dealing with “younger” generations who may not necessarily want a job for life but are only focused on a job for the next few years. I said that there is no difference from any other generation! I have been with BMS for 23 years but in about eight different positions and I have never spent more than three years in any one of them. I want people to recognize that there are multiple opportunities within BMS, be it laterally, upwards or geographically. It is never boring here! We also have a real focus on diversity and inclusion. Having a diverse team of employees and an inclusive culture is vital for innovation and successfully executing our BioPharma business strategy.

Ireland has traditionally been an API manufacturing hub but is now seeing significant investment in biologics. What is Ireland’s value proposition here?

An investment of nearly USD one billion is not something to be taken lightly. BMS looked at a variety of factors before making this investment in Ireland. A key one was the availability of talented employees. A majority of people go on to third-level education and we have strong university programs in STEM-subjects. Add to that our strong manufacturing heritage in Ireland and over half a century’s track record of conducting business successfully here. We have proven that, given the opportunity, we will deliver. The existing site with sufficient acreage and existing infrastructure was also a bonus.

A significant chunk of global biopharma investment at the moment is in biologics and a fair share of that is in Ireland. BMS’ own investment contributes to Ireland’s reputation as a biopharma hub. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, there is already a well-established pharma industry here, and this means that there is already a thriving ecosystem we can capitalize on. In Cruiserath, for instance, the government and local Fingal County council have done a fantastic job at providing all the outside infrastructure needed, like roads, electricity and water, which is essential for biologics production. You have to credit their ‘build it and they will come’ attitude, which has reaped rewards for them: the local area in Cruiserath in turn has been rewarded with investments from BMS, Mallinckrodt and Alexion..

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The main challenge is keeping up with the demand for talent, something BMS Ireland is acutely aware of and dealing proactively with. As an industry, we do need to be more proactive on this as we have a responsibility to develop our workforce, too. That said, everything that has made Ireland a manufacturing hub in the past five decades continues to exist: good people, a predictable business environment and the Irish 'can-do' attitude. The pharma industry is not in Ireland by accident, and the industry understands that the same recipe will work just as well for large molecules as it has for small molecules. History is our blueprint here.

Where do you want to see BMS Biologics Ireland in the next five years?

First and foremost, our target is to have this facility operational and producing Opdivo® for delivery to patients by end-2019, so I absolutely want to deliver this on time. Our patients need this product and I do not want them to be affected by any delay.

The pharma industry is increasingly adopting a more holistic, end-to-end view, instead of viewing the value chain as discrete elements. What unites us all is the ultimate aim of delivering life-saving medicines to patients as fast, efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. We remind ourselves of the importance of patient-centricity all the time; for instance, we have pictures of patients hung around our facilities. The reason for speed is patients' need. We do not isolate ourselves as one part of the machine – we understand that if we do not do our jobs and the products cannot get onto the shelves, they do not reach the patients either!

I have been with BMS for over 23 years, and this has given me the perspective needed to recognize that we are now in a period of unprecedented opportunity, particularly for this facility. To be able to be involved in delivering transformational medicines for something as serious as cancer is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I cannot overstate this. This is how I energize myself and my team here: everyone here, from management to lab technicians to construction workers to security guards understand the mission that we are fulfilling, and this keeps us all motivated.

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