

Interview: Philip Hendrick - Managing Director, Air Liquide Healthcare Ireland



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Philip Hendrick, the Managing Director of Air Liquide Healthcare Ireland, a provider of home-based respiratory solutions, discusses the changes that the Irish healthcare system is going through, and how they are at the forefront of transitioning the healthcare system from hospital based to home-based

Philip, as an introduction for our international readers, could you provide us with an overview of your current footprint here in Ireland?

Currently, we are a leading provider of respiratory home care services in Ireland. We supply predominantly to the Health Service Executive's (HSE) patients with home oxygen services, noninvasive ventilation, sleep apnea services and niche products for the respiratory market. That is our core strength as a company, and we have 58 trained staff delivering those services across the country. Over the years, we have developed these services in conjunction with the HSE through consultation to address patients' needs. We have been at the forefront of the evolving market of respiratory home care and have thousands of patients under our care at any given time. We cover the full spectrum of patients, from neonatal to geriatric. Our area of expertise is home care solutions for patients who want to live at home supported 24/7 with our therapy services.

Working with the HSE teams in hospitals and Community Health Organizations gives us the opportunity to help patients through their journey with a chronic condition, which can be quite

challenging. Obviously, something has changed in their health in order to need our intervention, in most cases it is a deterioration in their health, sometimes it is acute or sometimes chronic. We develop very personalized relationships with our patients as we work with them from their homes, we coach them regularly on how to use the equipment and create the best personalized therapy that is going to benefit their long-term health.

In addition, depending on the conditions of the patients, we set up the equipment in the hospital and help transfer them to their homes. We also work with patients that have life threatening conditions, where a malfunction in the equipment might have very serious consequences, therefore safety is our core value. Our business has transformed through ownership in the past decade, but safety has always remained at the core of our operations. Safety is our number one priority; safety is in our DNA.

With this core focus and track record, clinicians, their teams, and patients turn to us when needed for advice, training and support. We have introduced several significant steps throughout the years to enhance safety, that's one of the reasons why we have nurses in our team. We are therapy providers, so we do not take on the clinical aspect of the patient's care; our nurses act as a bridge between the patients and the clinicians and hospital teams. Our nurses are experts on not only the therapies, but also the home-based healthcare system; therefore, they are a very powerful liaison. Our team works on a daily basis trying to find solutions and adapting different therapies in conjunction with the clinicians for patients that are not benefiting from their therapy.

You mentioned before how even with the different ownership phases Air Liquide Healthcare Ireland has gone through, the ethos of safety has always been at the core of the company. How has that transition been and what benefits has it created?

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When a small company is acquired, due diligence and investigations take place, but you never know what you have acquired until you look 'under the hood'. I was confident that our operating methods would fit with Air Liquide's culture. During the transition period, we kept processes that were originally in place and the Air Liquide best practices and culture were completely adopted and welcomed within weeks. The transition was helped also because we retained all our local management team and received great support from our sister company in the UK, Air Liquide Homecare Limited. John Webber, Managing Director of Air Liquide Homecare UK has guided myself and my team into the Air Liquide environment assiduously and is a tremendous support.

How has this transition to Air Liquide impacted your innovation culture?

Very positively! As part of the Air Liquide Group, we have the support of a multinational constantly researching products and new markets. We support over 1.3 million patients globally and the public health challenges of an aging population and rise in chronic health conditions offers the opportunity to diversify, perhaps into infusion and diabetes care for instance. These challenges have to be met by offering home healthcare services to support the patient in their homes, we all want to live out our lives in the comfort of our homes, using therapies with connected technologies to ensure we have sustainable healthcare system. Utilizing the strength and depth of our parent company, our culture of innovation is enhanced in many ways.

What is the timeline for the introduction of the lines of products in Ireland?

The HSE is evolving homecare services constantly and is the major driver of change, and therefore will determine most of the timelines for entering new markets with innovative services, using leading technologies. Supported by our parent company, we are researching many opportunities and we hope to expand our portfolio as and when the right opportunity presents itself.

One objective of Air Liquide is to be “one of the leaders in the healthcare sector.” How do you believe that Air Liquide differentiates itself from its competitors?

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Our commitment is to protect vulnerable lives, so we have a very patient centered culture in the company. We are committed to care for the patients with every safety measure in their home environment. There are many competitors that offer great products too, but we have a proven track record of providing the best service possible with the highest safety standards while also putting our patients at the core. That means that we always have to go the extra mile, to cover some of the gaps that exist in the healthcare system. We need to be flexible, while being competitive and providing a safe service. Our services are constantly evolving to adapt to the needs of the patients who are becoming more mobile, more involved in their health, and so on.

Air Liquide has been at the frontline of the introduction of a home-based health care system to alleviate the pressure in the hospitals. What have been some of the major challenges in this initiative and some of the opportunities?

Big data is really transforming the healthcare system. The new technologies available help clinicians to be more precise and efficient with the way patients are being cared for. By collecting data, and properly analyzing it, hospital teams can decide who should, and should not, need to visit, thereby creating time and space for the patients who actually need them, while the rest of

the patients can be monitored remotely and supported with homecare when required. The goal is to intervene only when it is truly necessary. Many patients do extremely well in their therapies, and they only need to go to the hospital once a year, while we keep visiting them regularly at their home providing support such as portable oxygen refills, training and therapy prescription changes, which subsequently minimizes the traffic into hospitals.

We will avail ourselves of opportunities in the transformation of the healthcare system by determining the core needs and addressing them either with technology, modifying our current services, or a combination of both.

You have now been in a country management role for over two years. What have been some of the key takeaways for you during that time?

Having worked in this company for over 20 years, starting with the original owner, Bill Flanagan, I have had the opportunity to progress from regional management to national commercial lead and now the responsibility for the Irish business. Those years of experience have given me an in-depth understanding of the market, and I have drawn on that experience to help our team to adjust to the constant challenges we face on a day to day basis. Leading a major transition in a company is a test, but working in healthcare is always a challenge, so to answer your question, my two key takeaways would be flexibility and teamwork. I am privileged to work with a dedicated local management team that has tremendous experience who work tirelessly with me to ensure we constantly move forward. It is a great honor to be able to lead such a great company, we have a very fine team and we have the privilege of being invited into hundreds of patients' homes every week to help them on their healthcare journeys.

Looking forward to the next three to five years, what are your ambitions for the affiliate and where do you hope to see Air Liquide in Ireland?

In three years from now, most of our market is going to have changed for the better, as the HSE evolve how they procure primary care services in each Community Health Organization. We aspire to become bigger and better at what we do and have more market share. The HSE wants a dynamic market, with safe, solid suppliers, so we aspire to be the biggest one. I expect we will have diversified into other home cared markets if the opportunity presents itself. Technology will have also evolved much more by then, helping us take on those new opportunities.

On a more personal note, what motivates you every morning to come into the office?

Our services impact people's lives, and we strive to improve quality of life through what we do. Meeting patients and also reading the letters and emails that family members of our patients send

us really motivates me to keep doing what I do. When I joined the company over 20 years ago, the most important person was the patient, because what we do can protect and enhance their lives, and that is the core motivator for me every day. If I can help in any way to enhance a patient's experience, it provides tremendous satisfaction and motivates me for the next challenge.

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