Albert Barberá – Director General for Research and Innovation in Health for the Government of Catalonia, Spain



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Albert Barberá, director general of research and innovation in health for the Government of Catalonia, highlights his top priorities to facilitate the growth of the Catalan innovation scene and how he plans to transfer this to the healthcare system. Furthermore, he explains the importance of providing smaller companies with the tools required for success, which in turn will increase the chances of commercial success stories in the region.

What is the mandate of your position?

I began my career in research and over the years I slowly moved towards management science, eventually becoming director general for the bioregion of Catalonia at Biocat. While working there I moved towards innovation and most recently I took up this position as Director General for Research and Innovation in Health for the Government of Catalonia. Our chief role in this department is to promote research and innovation within the healthcare ecosystem, mainly working with hospitals and research institutes. One of my main missions is to transfer the information we generate from Catalan R&D and integrate it into our healthcare system. This is a challenge that will allow us in the end to have a positive impact on the people using Catalan healthcare.

What were the top priorities over the last 18 months?

Our ecosystem has moved very quickly in the last ten to 15 years. We have to be smart and strategic about how we handle the funds allocated towards research as we must understand how best to divide it within the different institutions. My vision is to be partners with the institutes in the long-term, so we can jointly develop the strategies, rather than only supporting them via investment. We have to be able as a government to have a clear view of what we want to do and who are the main actors. Additionally, we have to decide in which way the government will facilitate innovation.

At the moment, there is no real problem with the amount of money being invested in Catalonia. I rather see the challenge at the beginning of the process at how we set up the company from a deal flow perspective and how we better understand which companies to invest in and how much. We need to identify all the possibilities of our institutes and universities at an earlier stage and provide these companies with the required tools to be successful. Biocat is a great strategic partner as they help in this process. We see many researchers that are only amazing at developing the scientific aspect, though lack the mindset for the business side. Our job to help them facilitate this aspect and partner with them. We still want a competitive atmosphere where the best companies eventually rise to the top, but as aforementioned, we provide them with the relevant tools so these champion companies can have the best chance possible to succeed.

Another priority for us is personalized medicine which is a big area here in Catalonia. We have very good science and infrastructure and our goal is to move to make personalized healthcare an area of interest and build on the available assets that exist in the region.

Lastly, the use of big data which is an important asset for us. We have a very well-integrated system between primary care and specialized care which offers a big opportunity when analyzing big data and doing proof of context on real evidence. We have a lot of information from hospitals and other entities which has huge potential in research. Clinical trials are an important asset for the region, the leader in Spain, and this big data will allow us to understand how to grow this area even more. For example, Vall d’Hebron is a cornerstone European and global hospital for clinical trials in oncology, and in oncology in general.

What makes Catalonia the champion autonomous community in Spain for R&D?

We have excellent science, which is the fundamental basis for R&D and the key to experience the rise of startups in biotech. Within Catalonia, despite any changes at the governmental level, there has always been a continuous strategy focused towards the end goal, backed by this excellence in science the region is associated with. An example is the government creation of Biocat. The main goal of this organization, which is part of the government but is not the administration, is to support the ecosystem growth and is a good resource regardless it the company within the space of pharmaceuticals or medical devices.

Is it a dream or reality for Catalonia to be considered a biotech cluster?

Personally, I think it is a reality. One thing we miss is a real biotechnology pharmaceutical giant, like a Novo Nordisk or AstraZeneca, with the large local players being medium size pharma companies. Big Pharma acts as catalysts for the innovation landscape and aids the growth of the local biotech science. Nevertheless, the view of pharmaceutical companies towards Catalonia is changing, and for this our administration is looking to offer as many tools as possible for the companies so they, in turn, have commercial success, possibly becoming the next Almirall, or even going beyond that. If these tools are available, then eventually a company will prosper and reach targets, a bit like shooting in football. If you keep on working at it, eventually you will score a goal.

Many scientists are attracted by the large buyout from big pharma, preventing them from reaching commercial success. How do you prevent this from happening in Catalonia?

We are at a position to change this as now there are more actors in the market and even more tools available to them. Five to ten years ago, there was less financing and support for companies. Nowadays, we have more biopharmaceutical companies and family businesses with different perspectives and goals. Some have financial goals while others have a philanthropic or social one. Furthermore, the more doors you open for companies, the more opportunities they will have to prosper, rather than just selling at the end. As the government is our obligation to make the best effort to provide all the necessary routes for success, and while it is a challenge, it is equally a great opportunity.

What do you want to achieve in the next two years?

We want to design a road map for personalized medicine from a healthcare standpoint. This will be challenging since it’s something that will require assistance from other organizations. There are many things happening right now in the region in regard to cell and gene therapy and we have world-class researchers in the region, though we still lack that brings it all together and this is our role to play. Having personalized medicine done in an organized manner will have a huge impact since you can have a better and quicker diagnosis and this approach is transferable to rare disease patients. Therefore, the social impact will be enormous.

The other goal is to scale up the ecosystem. Be able to create more top-notch companies, by providing an increase in investments and supporting starts ups. Though above all we must provide the tools they require to increase their chances of success.

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