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SwedenBIO gathers together actors from across the life science ecosystem of Sweden, with members ranging from small university spin-offs to large international companies, incubators, science parks, patent bureaus, and funding bodies. Jonas Ekstrand and Helena Strigård outline what makes Sweden such an innovation powerhouse, how SwedenBIO has fostered international connections, and the ways in which it is improving conditions for clinical trials domestically.

Could you give our readers an overview of the strengths of Sweden's life sciences ecosystem?

Jonas Ekstrand (JE): Sweden has a long tradition of innovation and excellence in the life sciences sector, having introduced a long list of medical breakthroughs such as the pacemaker, the ventilator, hemodialysis, Xalantan for eye disease and lidocaine for local anesthesia to name a few.

Today, the Swedish life sciences sector is an innovative powerhouse fueled by strong capital supply. In recent years, early and mid-stage life science companies have expanded opportunities to finance their operations thanks to the thriving private equity and stock markets, as well as increased public funding from Vinnova, the Swedish innovation agency, Almi – a public venture capital company – and European Horizon 2020 support programs. We also see that money generated from licensing deals and acquisitions is being reinvested locally, creating a positive feedback loop driving more innovation.

The fact that money is reinvested shows the dedication of leading Swedish entrepreneurs to the success of the local life sciences sector. They not only contribute financially but also through dedicating time to share their experience with other members of the community.

Another key part of the success of Swedish life science companies that is often disregarded is service providers. As knowledge and competence banks, they are absolutely crucial to the development of projects.

Helena Strigård (HS): The Swedish innovation powerhouse is also propelled by our excellent academic and research institutions and the support they provide to talented entrepreneurs, exemplified by the fact that within the field of precision medicine for instance, 75 percent of biotech and medtech startups are university spin-offs. Foreign multinationals and national champions eager to access innovation have understood what Sweden has to offer and are actively building bridges with the local ecosystem.

For instance, AstraZeneca opened the BioVentureHub at the heart of its Gothenburg site, giving emerging life sciences companies and academic groups a unique opportunity to interact with Big Pharma and each other. The recent decision of Bayer to move its headquarters to the world-renowned Karolinska Institute sends a strong signal of Big Pharma's interest in Swedish life science. Another major contribution to the ecosystem is GE Healthcare. The company, in partnership with the Swedish government, opened the non-for-profit Testa BioProcess Innovation

Center to help academics, startups and biopharmaceutical companies secure industrial proofs-of-concept more quickly and at less expense.

However, although Swedish companies are extremely innovative, most of them are small. What we would like to see is for this innovation force to translate into growing mid-size to large companies. For this to happen, Swedish companies need to conquer foreign markets.

How does SwedenBIO help local companies internationalize?

HS: Now more than ever, our focus is on encouraging companies to spread their wings internationally, while keeping one foot in Sweden. However, as the Swedish saying goes, you cannot lift yourself in the air. You need something an external force. What we need externally is intelligent capital and business-to-business contacts with mid-sized and large companies in life sciences hubs such as the San Francisco Bay Area and Boston.

In order to pursue those goals, in November 2018, SwedenBIO formed a new division, International Business Development and Promotion. For the first time, this new division will bring together Nordic partners at key international life sciences events such as BIO US in Philadelphia and BIO Europe in Copenhagen. Moreover, our flagship event organized for the last six years, the Nordic Life Science Days, will now use BIO's partnering system, allowing US investors together with multinational pharma and medtech companies to engage more efficiently with life science in Sweden and the Nordics. During this event, entrepreneurs and investors have the opportunity to exchange ideas via 30 minutes "speed meeting" sessions. The popularity of this event has grown tremendously over the last few years. The number of attendees has doubled, with last year's edition gathering more than 1,300 people from 40 different countries. Consequently, the number of meetings has also increased from 1,000 to 3,000, generating a significant amount of business opportunities.

Moreover, in order to showcase our hidden treasures to the world and attract global intelligent capital, we are mapping the country's drug discovery pipeline.

Speaking of drug development, the number of clinical trials in Sweden has been decreasing for the past decade. What should be done to curb this trend?

HS: The decrease in clinical trials mainly stems from the fact that medical staff in Sweden lack the time and incentive to conduct clinical trials. This issue is a key agenda priority. As a member of

Clinical Studies Sweden’s board, we are collaborating with authorities, the healthcare sector, and the life sciences industry in order to find solutions.

JE: At the moment, the performance of hospitals is mainly measured by the ability to produce healthcare while research and clinical studies come second. Sweden has found the recipe to weave strong links between the industry and academia, now we need to find a way to include the healthcare system in our efforts to promote the development of Swedish life sciences.

Because in Sweden regional authorities are responsible for delivering healthcare, changes cannot be pushed by the central government. Instead, each hospital and each region need to push things forward. I believe that the creation of Clinical Studies Sweden with regional nodes will get the ball rolling.

In addition to being associated with research and innovation, Sweden also boasts a reputation for quality manufacturing. How important is Sweden today as a production hub of innovative pharmaceuticals and medical technologies?

JE: A lot of things are happening in this regard. For instance, AstraZeneca’s global manufacturing and supply site in Gothenburg is now being expended to biopharmaceutical production. Moreover, in 2017, GE Healthcare pledged to invest USD 50-70 million per year until 2022 in its bioprocessing equipment and consumables site in Uppsala to double capacity. This site alone is fulfilling about 80 to 90 percent of the market, and over 200 approved biologics used technologies or consumables made in Uppsala. This represents a major contribution of Sweden to global life sciences. Among smaller local players, Cobra Biologics is a rising star in biopharma production. Last March, the company announced the construction of a new plant to expand the production of DNA vaccines as well as gene and immunotherapy therapies in Sweden.

HS: For companies deciding where to manufacture products, it comes down to economics. While Sweden may seem like an expensive place to manufacture, in reality the country is very competitive, not only when it comes to competence and productivity but also in actual costs. For instance, energy is cheap and labour costs similar to that of Germany. When it comes to manufacturing advanced products, having a skilled workforce that can quickly solve problems creatively is a key asset. In addition to skilled employees, Sweden offers many other advantages as

a manufacturing location of innovative medicines and medical technologies such as political and economic stability, great infrastructure, excellent water quality, and good employer relations based on the collective bargaining system.

What makes you both so passionate about promoting the success of Swedish life sciences?

HS: Personally, I feel like I am entering at a moment in time where life sciences in Sweden is leapfrogging into the future and the rest of the world is looking at us for innovation access.

JE: Swedish life science companies are truly the export drivers of the future. Now it is time to build bridges with the world.

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