Jenni Nordborg – Director & National Coordinator, Life Sciences Office Sweden

I believe in our ability to be a frontrunner in the coming healthcare revolution

09.07.2019

Tags: Sweden, Life Sciences Office Sweden, Healthcare, Regulation, Digitalization

The Life Sciences Office Sweden was commissioned in February 2018 and is modelled on the UK's Office for Life Sciences. Jenni Nordborg, the Office's director and national coordinator, discusses the future of the life sciences sector in Sweden, including digitalization and collaborations with other Nordic nations.

In February 2018, you were appointed Director of the new Life Science Office, a unique initiative where three different ministries, regional authorities, academia, innovation agencies, industry associations, and companies collaborate to enhance life science research and develop the sector. Could you introduce our international readers to the main goals these different actors are trying to achieve?

The Life Sciences Office's overarching goal is for Sweden to remain a centre for life sciences, while also securing a sustainable health and welfare system. In Sweden, we have an exceptional healthcare system and a competitive life sciences industry which are important for us to maintain. We can leverage many foundational assets we possess including our collaborative research ecosystem, our excellent academic centres such as the Karolinska Institute, our national registries, and our dynamic life sciences companies. Looking towards the future, we face many new challenges. The Life Sciences Office's role within government is to set forth a national strategy for

life sciences and coordinate policy development. In this endeavour, the government is joining forces with the healthcare regions along with industry and academia.

What have been some of the main developments since last year?

Last year we published a roadmap for life sciences which was an invitation for the entire ecosystem to contribute their expertise to the strategy. Thanks to this initiative, we have gathered hundreds of high-quality inputs from the ecosystem. Healthcare and life sciences are mostly managed at the regional level in Sweden, and therefore we have engaged in many dialogues with the various regional actors, including seven regional conversations where we have met with politicians and leaders responsible for the governance of the healthcare system, but also with the companies present within these regions and finally with academia. The idea is to build the life sciences strategy on a strong partnership between the national and regional levels while taking a holistic and long-term perspective. In order to lead the successful implementation of the strategy, I am now moving into a fulltime position at the Life Sciences Office as National Coordinator.

The Swedish Life Sciences office is modelled after the UK Office for Life Science, but what makes it unique?

In Sweden, we cannot have the same scale as the UK Office for Life Sciences as we are a smaller country and do not have the same sized government. However, the office is set up in the best way so that we can organize ourselves efficiently within the Swedish government. Therefore, we are teaming up personnel from three ministries: the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation. The staff still works at their respective ministry but also at the Life Sciences Office which is a necessity in order to be successful. My steering committee is made of the state secretaries who are coordinated with the ministers. Furthermore, I have an advisory board in the form of an innovation partnership program set up by the Prime Minister’s office.

A key priority of the Life Science Office is to leverage health care data for the development of tomorrow’s disease prevention, treatment and cure. Are you on the right track to achieve this goal?

This is an area where we need to have a holistic and long-term perspective. The development of health data is one of the priorities in the strategic partnership between the national government and regional authorities. We must work with different ways of governance in order to leverage the phenomenal data sets that we possess, not only in the quality registers and health registries but also in the biobanks. Sweden needs to build an interoperable health data infrastructure with clear governance rules in order to make the data usable. A thorough review of existing regulations and bold policy development are a prerequisite to achieving this goal. Regarding precision medicine, work also needs to be done on the international regulatory framework. For this to happen, the public sector must adopt a new type of mindset and become a driver for innovation instead of sitting in the back seat. All staff working in both the healthcare and homecare sector will need support from leaders in their organizations to integrate research and innovation as a part of their work.

Precision medicine, offering tailored forms of treatment through advanced genetic diagnostic methods and high-resolution imaging technologies is developing rapidly. Does Sweden have the potential to become a frontrunner in this field and why?

Definitely! It is Sweden’s ambition to be a frontrunner in precision medicine, not only in R&D and testing but also in the implementation through new reimbursement models and development of the regulatory framework. In order to work on these different areas, government and regional healthcare authorities have jointly set up Genomic Medicine Sweden, a new infrastructure for bioinformatics and genetics. Moreover, a pre-requisite for precision medicine and one of Sweden’s strengths is trust. We have the trust base from the Swedish people to participate in medical research. Precision medicine can utilize genetics in oncology and rare disease diagnostics which will be done the same way throughout the country.

When we spoke with Anders Blanck from LIF, he explained how in many ways the Swedish healthcare system is not adapted to the advent of next-generation gene and cell therapies, politically, legally and in terms of the supply chain. What needs to happen for Sweden to bridge the gap?

When it comes to advanced therapies and the utilization of data that is needed for precision medicine, we do have several challenges where we need to speed up development and action. For example, Sweden needs to look at some of the legal frameworks in order to enable the collection

and storage of data in regions different from where the treatment is produced. We have other policy development challenges which need to be dealt with. As we move into advanced therapies, research and implementation will happen at the same time, so we need a foundation on consent for participation and real-world evidence.

When we met with Heidi Stensmyren of the Swedish Medical Association, she said that developing countries are drawing inspiration from different leading healthcare systems like Sweden, and as a result are quickly catching up and overtaking Sweden to become even better on some aspects like digitalization, citing Estonia as an example. What can Sweden learn from other countries?

Sweden has much to learn from other countries when it comes to setting up the infrastructure and standards for health data. Finland, for instance, has introduced new legislation for secondary use of health data which represents an important step forward for healthcare, academia and industry to be able to leverage this data. In Sweden, we started digitalizing the healthcare system early on. Ten years ago, we were already fully digitalized. For instance, all prescriptions were e-prescriptions. However, the systems were developed at the regional level and, as a result, are not interoperable and up to date with today's international standards. We must build an interoperable infrastructure, which thankfully does not mean replacing the current infrastructure but rather connecting the different systems following international standards. We need to enable federation of data in a secure way.

A recurring theme throughout our interviews is that in the past decade Sweden has slowly lost its place as a testbed of innovative clinical trials. How can Sweden return to its former glory?

We have indeed seen a decline in industry-sponsored clinical trials, which is problematic because clinical trials drive research and offer the ability to provide the best diagnostics and treatments, which in turn is a driver for innovation and new investments. Therefore, we need to investigate what will make Sweden an attractive nation to conduct innovative clinical trials in the future. This is a key priority for Sweden as a leader in life sciences, an important challenge to be raised in the forthcoming national strategy. When looking at rare diseases for example, Sweden is a small country but combining forces with the other Nordic nations will enable us to become stronger in this area. In addition, by working together, Nordic countries can become a driving force in precision

medicine. The Swedish innovation agency Vinnova is already funding collaborations with other Nordic countries in this space.

When we spoke with Jonas Ekstrand, Director General of SwedenBIO, he emphasized the need for Swedish life sciences companies to attract more intelligent capital from abroad. How can Sweden increase its attractiveness as an investment destination?

In order to grow the life sciences industry, we need to not only attract foreign capital investments but also the right talent. The government has been working on some initiatives this past year in order to speed up this process. In this area too, we must work with other Nordic countries. For instance, SwedenBIO organizes the Nordic Life Science Days, an annual event which attracts an increasing number of international investors.

What do you think the future holds for Swedish life sciences?

Even though we have substantial challenges, I am highly optimistic about the future of life sciences in Sweden. I believe in our ability to be a frontrunner in the coming healthcare revolution by implementing the newest technologies in a sustainable, collaborative and creative manner.

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