Steve Profit – General Manager, Novo Nordisk Taiwan



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Steve Profit, general manager of Novo Nordisk Taiwan, shares a newcomers' perspective as a recent transplant to the market from the company's global office in Denmark. Profit goes on to share his mission to fulfil CEO Lars Fruergaard Jørgensen's strategy of expanding beyond being a leader of diabetes at the global level, while also realizing his own commitment to bringing innovative products and new healthcare options to the patients of Taiwan.

You have worked for Novo Nordisk as the global director of sales and marketing for six years and have recently taken on the role of general manager for the Taiwan affiliate. Coming from the west, what are your first impressions of the Taiwanese market?

Taiwan is an established marketplace for many pharma companies in the region, including Novo Nordisk. Growth in the market sector is around 4% in Taiwan. One reason that it is an attractive market place is the healthcare reimbursement, provided by Taiwan's National Health Insurance (NHI). The goal of the NHI is to deliver the best products to patients, in an affordable manner.

I have been very impressed by the efficiency of the NHI, with some physicians seeing up to 150 patients with diabetes a day! Even in the smaller clinics around Taiwan, I have seen how ambitious the doctors are in constantly striving to find new ways to enhance the patient experience, not only in diabetes treatment, but also in other areas. The physicians here are well trained and very keen to bring new, innovative treatments to their patients, so this is a great partnering opportunity for

Novo Nordisk and physicians to bring the best to patients in Taiwan.

From a company portfolio perspective, it is also a highly relevant marketplace, with regionally high rates of type II diabetes mellitus (10.9%) and obesity (>20%), in adults, not forgetting the commitment to patients treated by our biopharma products.

What is the strategic significance of Taiwan to the regional and global operations of Novo Nordisk?

Taiwan has one of the most progressive healthcare systems in the world and is a major hub for clinical research in the Asia-Pacific region. With a large talent pool of well trained clinical practitioners, well-established review system and government-supported world-class infrastructures, NN has identified Taiwan as a regional centre of excellence for conducting clinical trials in the Region China, with more than 15 clinical trials, including cardiovascular outcomes, ongoing in the fields of haemophilia, diabetes and obesity. These are being conducted in collaborations with prestigious medical centres, trial sites and national trial consortia. The R&D investment in clinical trials, in Taiwan, was approximately NTD 193 million between 2014 and 2018.

The data derived from these trials is also relevant to the medical communities in the neighbouring countries of China, Japan and Korea, due to similar disease prevalence and patient profiles. So clinical trial data are shared to better understand the safety and effectiveness of innovative treatments provided by Novo Nordisk and to improve patient care, public health and scientific progress.

I had the privilege of attending the American Diabetes Association (ADA), in San Francisco this year, where I received encouraging comments from our global team about the important strategic role Taiwan has contributed to the PIONEER 6 trial, which demonstrated the cardiovascular safety of oral semaglutide and the potential to become the first and only in class to offer the benefit of significant reduction in both cardiovascular and all-cause mortality for type II diabetic patients. I was also proud that Taiwan was the market not only recruiting the 2nd patient worldwide, in PIONEER 6, but also succeeding in completing patient enrollment ahead of the global trial schedule. My goal is to ensure that Taiwan can participate in important projects as an active player in the journey of improving patient outcomes.

The vision of NN, led by our current CEO Lars Fruergaard Jørgensen, is to find a cure for diabetes. Taiwan is committed to supporting this and our upcoming pipeline and partnerships.

Having European expertise in sales and marketing, what is your assessment of ease to market in Taiwan?

In all countries, market access is sometimes seen as a barrier to operations, but a necessary part of the regulation. The approach we take is to understand what is best for patients and work with health authorities and healthcare providers to enable this. Currently, NHI work with a tier positioning model, in which diabetes has a low tier of awareness, and our goal is to raise this within NHI. As obesity is still not recognized as a disease locally, we are supporting physicians to achieve this recognition by NHI.

Your CEO Lars Fruergaard Jørgensen is very focused on growing Novo Nordisk through new product launches, like the once-weekly GLP-1. How is this product received in the market?

In Taiwan, during 2020, we will launch two new exciting GLP-1 products, a once-weekly diabetes treatment and a new obesity treatment. Both products have already been launched in other markets, including the US, with extensive data demonstrating positive patient impacts (such as a well-received reduction in injection numbers), therefore we are truly excited to see how it can also benefit patients in Taiwan.

Our focus is not just on introducing more pioneering and best in class insulin products, ground-breaking treatment for medical obesity and innovative solutions to hemophilia and growth disorders to Taiwan market but also to work closely with local medical professionals, educator associations and patient groups to enhance awareness of disease and support and integrated patient-care.

Our new obesity treatment will be for patients with a BMI >27 (with one critical health indication) or BMI >30. For this to be a success, it is essential that we collaborate with the Taiwanese government and local obesity clinics to raise awareness for patients. For physicians to treat obesity effectively, NHI needs to formally recognize obesity as a disease.

I fundamentally believe that these innovative treatments will have a positive impact for patients in Taiwan and will give them a better quality of life.

How is Novo Nordisk’s portfolio represented at the local level?

Comparing Taiwan to global markets, it is a bit slower at bringing the newest products into the marketplace, not just for Novo Nordisk but across the pharma sector. With our comprehensive insulin portfolio available in Taiwan and the launch of a GLP-1 product in 2018, NN has been propelled to a leading position in the diabetes management in Taiwan

I admire the questioning Danish mindset, which always looks for an explanation rather than simply accepting circumstances. We have challenged the status quo and while many other companies think it is impossible to launch two new products within three months, we will soon be bringing our newest GLP-1 to Taiwan.

In addition, we are expecting several other exciting products to be launched in Taiwan within the upcoming five years across different therapeutic areas. We ambitiously aim at becoming the best treatment provider not only in the therapeutic area of diabetes but also in biopharm and obesity management.

We are going to challenge the way we have been working in the past and look more at the patient to maximize Novo Nordisk’s impact in Taiwan.

Talent is an important topic of discussion for all the big pharma players we have met in Taiwan thus far. Coming from corporate, how do you define the leadership strategy you intend on bringing to the affiliate?

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One of the main aspects of my job I enjoy the most is being able to develop both new and growing talents, coach my team, and help drive them forward in their careers. I am very fortunate to have a very stable, experienced and skilled organization here in Taiwan who I will support in reaching the next level of excellence.

Novo Nordisk also looks at how we can cultivate the next generation of talent and we have several initiatives such as internships, graduate programs, and talent exchanges among different countries, I will be keen to see how we can develop this further in Taiwan.

As a Scandinavian at heart, global company, Novo Nordisk has a culture that allows everyone to start a discussion and share their ideas, without a hierarchy. We have an open and honest approach across all areas of Novo Nordisk, including listening to our external partners such as patient groups, to ensure we can continuously learn and innovate.

As global director of sales and marketing for Novo Nordisk in Denmark, you helped lead the business into double-digit growth from 2014 onwards. What objectives do you have as general manager of the Taiwanese affiliate?

My key objective is to help patents in Taiwan have access to Novo Nordisk’s product portfolio. This is closely followed by the personal development of the team members, to ensure we have a forward-looking organization. Our team has an ambitious and realistic strategy, packed with product launches. I have made a commitment to lead and support the Taiwan affiliate and I want to impact and positively disrupt the market place here by delivering meaningful benefits for our patients and their families.

What advice would you give to younger professionals just starting their career in the pharma industry?

My advice would be to always be curious and come with ideas and strategies of how to implement innovations. Live to learn from everything you do and from those around you. Find a good mentor to test new ideas and create a career road map. Be bold in not accepting the status quo and if there is not a good explanation for why something is a particular way, then consider if it could be changed.

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