Anders Wesslau – General Manager, Merck KGaA Sweden



I am very proud to see the innovation work that the Swedish team has taken on and how they are exploring alternative ways to complement our traditional commercialization model

11.10.2019

Tags: Sweden, Merck, Strategy, Partnerships, Research

Anders Wesslau, the newly appointed general manager for Merck KGaA's business units in Sweden, underlines how Merck's healthcare business is a well-integrated player in the innovative Swedish life sciences ecosystem, illustrates the company's innovation partnerships with key research institutions, and how Merck is developing new technologies and solutions with key strategic partners for further use outside Sweden.

After nearly 12 years in the US and Switzerland, you have now returned to Sweden taking on the General Manager and Managing Director position. What are your first impression of the Swedish market after working abroad for so many years?

It really felt like coming 'home'. Before my time abroad, I had worked already for several years in Sweden, so when I returned that experience allowed me to quickly understand the markets, team dynamics and realize the key future priorities for Merck Sweden to succeed. As well, with my previous experience working in new product development, global marketing and commercialization, I had good insight into what this position would entail and could prepare accordingly for this new role.

I am very proud to see the innovation work that the Swedish team has taken on and how they are exploring alternative ways to complement our traditional commercialization model. We are

transforming our business, and this transformation will hopefully be used within the rest of the Merck Group one day. I see this as a very exciting opportunity and to further build on this spirit of innovation.

Furthermore, I now see a strong interest and eagerness in the scientific community to also continuously seek innovation. Therefore, the Merck Healthcare strategy in Sweden will be focused on strong collaboration and partnerships with the scientific community to find and explore the next molecule or mechanism of action, to provide patients with more effective treatment options and allow them the chance to live a simpler life. Less focus will be spent on traditional market tactics and commercial models.

Lastly, another observation I had upon my return is how we have a very international team operating here at Merck Sweden. This diverse culture base allows us to attract talent, create a broader skillset, improve decision making and tackle difficult market challenges.

Can you highlight what makes the Swedish life sciences sector unique in your eyes?

Today, Sweden is ranked second in the world on the international innovation index and this impressive ranking is the result of a long heritage of progressive thinking that continues today. Sweden institutionalized innovation and science early, establishing the Royal Swedish Academy of Science in 1742, as well as the Nobel committee in 1900 to recognize scientific innovation. Sweden was also early in setting up a patent system, allowing for innovation and sustainability that deterred widespread corruption, while fostering broad and free education and research funding.

In 2016, Sweden spent over three percent of its GDP on research and development, which is a much higher percentage than the US and EU.

This has allowed us to establish a strong footprint in life sciences. We have a vast knowledge of technology and materials. The combination of all of these makes us a leader in medical innovation and made us a hotspot for innovation overall as well.

How does Merck integrate into the innovative Swedish ecosystem?

We focus on developing long-term collaborations and partnerships. One recent example of this is the collaboration between with Karolinska Institute and our scientific colleagues at Merck Darmstadt. A science workshop was conducted earlier this year, which resulted in ten new pipeline

projects in the areas of neurology, oncology, immuno-oncology and immunology. It is important to realize that good ideas do not always come from a company's headquarters through a top-down approach, but instead how affiliates can also shape the future of research.

For more than three years, M-Digital, the innovation lab run by Merck's Digital Innovation and Patient Transformation team, has been part of the innovation hub 'Epicenter' in Stockholm. Epicenter is home to 3,000 people working in start-ups and support companies with the purpose of 'supercharging' innovation and growth. Spotify, iZettle and popular computer games such as Minecraft and Candy Crush were all conceived at the Epicenter.

Powered by Curiosity, our M-Digital team has identified and explored exciting new solutions for improving the patient experience in healthcare. In partnership with other innovative high-growth companies, they have tested new technologies, health services and delivery models and then scaled those proven successful for operational usage.

With one partner we have created, a social robot which has the ability to detect early signs of chronic disease and also the potential to reshape how healthcare professionals' approach early detection and diagnosis. Our experience, coming from working with people suffering from Multiple Sclerosis (MS), is that this type of a solution that alleviates the social barrier we may feel in discussing stigmatized personal health issues with a human. With another partner, we have developed a novel self-care and screening method – used as a digital biomarker and baseline for mobility issues linked to MS such as balance and cognition.

Lastly, in collaboration with another partner we have developed a virtual IVF-assistant that improves the fertility journey from "beginning-to-baby", thereby enabling more people to experience their wish of having a baby. This system is now being sold to clinics in Sweden and will soon be available abroad.

We will always continue to look for new innovative approaches for partnerships across the entire healthcare value chain.

Sweden is at the forefront of market access in Europe so do you see the Swedish model being replicated in other European countries?

The Swedish model has already served as an example for other European countries, as we have the oldest health technology assessment body in the world along with a value-based pricing system established since 2002, both of which are now in use in many European healthcare systems

Unique to the Swedish reimbursement system is the valuation from a societal perspective, using a holistic approach as to how a treatment is contributing to the eventual overall outcome. While other countries may have a short-term budget perspective, our system provides longevity in thinking about innovation and how it will benefit the patient. Sweden is also a reference country for others when it comes health technology assessment, as we have access to factually correct, high-quality data. The final example is our generics pricing system, where savings are gained from loss of exclusivity, are then used for the introduction of new innovative products.

Merck is increasingly focused on the development of innovative oncology and immuno-oncology medicines. Last autumn, the government of Sweden announced national investments in cancer care and the allocation of funds for a new cancer fighting strategy. What is Merck expecting from this new strategy moving forward?

While there are nationwide third-party agreements, which also include the use of Merck Healthcare products, we would like the system to improve further. As a leading provider of innovative medicines, we are looking for more flexibility to ensure rapid patient access to new innovative treatments. The current system, for instance, does not have the flexibility to appeal any decisions and therefore we would like to see patients get rapid access to new innovative treatments.

Denmark has been very successful in ensuring patient access to new and innovative oncology treatments throughout the country. Sweden has tried to follow the Danish model; however, it has been less successful due to the fragmentation of our regionalized healthcare system. This is a serious hurdle for our system in trying to achieve and maintain equal care in general, especially in oncology. Despite the plan of establishing central points of care for different treatment areas such as oncology, the autonomy of each region in the country is still blocking these efforts. We at Merck hope that there will be more movement in this area to achieve equal opportunity for care and faster access to new innovative treatments, as there is a serious need for this.

How does Merck leverage Sweden’s unique set of quality registries?

Real-world data assessments are recognized as being valuable and important tools to further understand medical products in use post-approval, as well as to validate clinical trial data. In addition, there is a great need among physicians, patients and payers in the healthcare system, to evaluate the long-term effects of product usage.

The Quality Registries are useful for both patients as well as physicians and nurses, as they answer practical questions that might occur during treatment but weren't originally captured during clinical trials. For instance, clinical trials do not sometimes take into consideration the possibility of pregnancy, but this, of course, can happen, and this data is then incorporated and documented in the registries.

Sweden has over 100 Quality Registries, which provide a great opportunity to better understand the treatments after it has been approved and yet at the same time, they are often underutilized.

Where do you see Merck Sweden in four to five years?

I see several new immunology and oncology treatments being launched as well as innovation projects that create value across the entire healthcare value chain. After more than 350 years, it is in our DNA to continue providing unique and highly differentiating products.

We hope to see more clinical trials being conducted in Sweden, especially in the immuno-oncology space, while also continuing to build important real-world data. From a company standpoint, we also want Merck Sweden to be more internationally recognized and truly become a hub of innovation for Merck.

Do you have any final message to our international audience?

Merck in Sweden is a truly innovative company when it comes to finding new and innovative products and solutions to our patients. We work tirelessly to build an ecosystem that allows the patient to be at the centre of everything we do. Our collaborations with clinics and partners across Sweden are focused solely on patients, to help them better understand treatments, provide better solutions and empower them to make better-informed decisions.

Our ultimate goal is to link patient centricity to innovation while remaining compliant with national regulations. We want to be mavens in our key treatment areas. Working at Merck gives all of us the opportunity to be curious and think outside the box.

See more interviews