Carl Johan Sonesson – Chairman of the Executive Committee, Region Skåne, Sweden

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Region Skåne is the county council responsible for healthcare, public transport, business development, culture, infrastructure, and environmental issues in Skåne, Sweden. We sit down with Carl Johan Sonesson, chairman of the Executive Committee, who highlights his plan to dramatically reduce the waiting times in the region's healthcare system, the importance of the life science industry to Skåne and the whole Medicon Valley, in addition to the key behind Sweden's unique innovative culture.

As chairman of Region Skåne's Health and Medical Board for several years, you have constantly referred to healthcare as being your number one priority. Why are you so committed to healthcare?

Healthcare is and should be a priority for everyone because having a healthy population is the key measure for a good society. Through succeeding in having a good welfare system, citizens are provided with the chance of thinking beyond just their basic needs. The healthcare system should be inclusive and open to everyone, not just the wealthy. This is a profound democratic issue and is also something that ends up being reflected in the economy of any region or country. At the end of the day, healthy citizens contribute more towards a better society.

You were successful in last year's Region Skåne elections by putting the growing waiting times to receive care at the centre of the campaign. What actions have you taken since then to reduce the waiting times?

Waiting times were, of course, our priority and we have already put certain mechanisms in place that we hope will be a solution. One measure was designating SEK 140 million (USD 14.4 million) to a general pot of money that will be given to clinics and hospitals in Skåne that are able to reduce their waiting times. The idea is to give an incentive for clinics to be more efficient, as this was not the case before. The method during the previous four years was looking at places with the highest waiting times and giving them money, expecting them to fix it, which did not work. But now clinics and hospitals are rewarded if they are able to improve.

Then we also believe that primary healthcare physicians can help specialists in hospitals with the workload. We are designating SEK 1 billion (USD 103.2 million) over the next four years to be able to channel more patients into primary care facilities. It is also about educating our citizens, because many patients go directly into emergency rooms when a visit to a local clinic would suffice. The healthcare system is financed by taxpayers and we must spend it wisely. There is also a reform to open up the system to more private companies that can deliver healthcare and help the system.

You recently criticized Sweden's Patient Data Act because it prevents the transfer of patient data between different healthcare providers and urged a change in legislation. How will those changes make the system more efficient in helping patients?

It will give us a way to open up the system so different providers can talk to each other in a higher degree. We have an issue in the country with elderly care because it belongs to the cities and their system does not communicate with the regional and national system, as it is not connected. The law does not allow the exchange of data between them. It is a good thing to work as a team, to collaborate. Region Skåne is just across the bridge from Denmark and would also be beneficial to everyone if we could cross the international border.

Together with the Copenhagen region, Skåne constitutes one of the fastest-growing regions in Europe for companies and research in the field of life science. What makes

the region’s life sciences ecosystem stand out? ´

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What is the key behind making the region so appealing within life science?

Medicon Valley has a triple combination of government agencies, research infrastructure and business networks with a holistic approach to life science. Certainly, Region Skåne plays an important role in that success and development, with its triple helix of academia, government and industry. It is a stimulating environment for everybody with a long history and tradition.

The result of all the collaboration is a sophisticated ecosystem focused on driving up opportunities and bringing down time to market.

How is the relationship between Region Skåne and the industry?

We take a strategic approach to life science development that brings stakeholders together. It is a great relationship that has produced incredible projects to improve the quality of life of our citizens. Region Skåne is a key partner in the triangle of collaboration, our doors are always open. We also collaborate with the European Union on healthcare projects. There is a large-scale project to make Malmö the designated city in the fight against diabetes.

Region Skåne plays a key role in supporting innovation and medical research through funding clinical research and infrastructure. During the past year, for example, we opened a world-class facility for genomic medicine.

In terms of economic growth, Region Skåne’s Gross Regional Product increased by 43 percent between 2000-2017. Why do you think the region has been so successful in terms of economic development?

There are many factors, as Region Skåne is always trying to take the lead on innovation projects; digitalization and artificial intelligence are great examples. There are a lot of startups and they operate in a supportive environment, one in which they can find trusted partners and incredibly talented people. The large companies see the potential of startups and are always looking for the next big thing. Another element we have on our favour is that Copenhagen is just across the bridge, which makes us a part of one of Europe's most important metropolitan areas.

Region Skåne has the goal of becoming Europe's most innovative region by 2020. How far along are you towards that goal?

We are making great progress and continue to grow as a region. Whether we succeed is not the most important part, it is about aiming high. Having challenging goals puts on in a situation in which everybody gives their best. Among the 266 regions in the European Union, Region Skåne ranks 23rd in terms of R&D investment, which is one way of measuring innovation. The goal is to continue investing in the future.

What are the keys behind Sweden's success in terms of innovation?

We have always been good at detecting opportunities and taking risks. We were pioneers in using computer technology and saw the potential of the internet early on – for example, there was a program in the 1990s to provide computers to the population. Sweden is willing to use its financial resources on novel ideas that can improve the quality of life.

What can the audience expect from the region in the near future?

I expect that Region Skåne has the lowest waiting times to receive care in the country after five years. Also, we want to continue innovating with a focus on digitalization because of the potential to improve the healthcare system, which must be centred around patients. We need to listen more to patients. One of my personal goals is that Region Skåne becomes the region with the lowest tax rate in all of Sweden again.

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