# Hilde Bech – General Manager, BMS Norway



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09.10.2020

Tags: Norway, BMS, Strategy, Diversity

*BMS Norway's Hilde Bech outlines her hopes of bringing "the medicines of the future" to Norwegian patients, why tiny Norway still has global significance for the company, and offers some pearls of wisdom for the next generation of female leaders.*

**How did you become General Manager (GM) at Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS) Norway?**

I initially trained as a physiotherapist and spent the first ten years of my career working directly with patients. It was during this period that I became interested in research, but I also really loved working with patients, so I made the move into pharma. In 2000, I started working at the Norwegian company Nycomed, which was later acquired by the Japanese firm Takeda. I spent seven years in Nycomed in various positions – first in sales and later in management. In 2007, I was recruited by BMS, as a sales and product manager of the cardiovascular team. I spent three years as business unit director for cardiovascular and diabetes in the Nordics region. I have been GM at BMS' Norwegian affiliate since 2013.

**How is BMS organized in Norway today?**

BMS used to be a Nordic organization with centralized leadership and business units across the Nordic countries. But it soon became obvious that market access situations are incredibly localized

– and that they vary significantly from country to country. We recognized the need to set up local organizations that focus on bringing innovations to specific markets, so we moved away from the Nordic structure to focus on individual countries. We became a Norwegian organization in 2013. We still have a hub in Stockholm, with some shared enabling functions – such as finance and HR – but all the operational, commercialization, medical and access functions are in Norway.

**What distinguishes Norway's healthcare system from that of either Denmark or Sweden?**

There are a lot of similarities between the healthcare systems in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, but one major difference is that in Norway, decisions to bring new drugs to market are highly political. The decision-making process is carried out as part of a national conversation. Above all, equality is embedded in Norway's politics, meaning any new drug has to be available to everyone, independent of how much you earn or where you live. This means that any decision to bring a drug to market is a decision made for everyone.

Equality is the backbone of Norwegian society. Norway has a particularly social democratic way of thinking – you provide what you can, and you get what you need. This means that once a drug is approved in Norway, there is widespread uptake and usage. Gaining approval is an uphill struggle.

**How is BMS Norway managing the global merger with Celgene?**

We have the best and the brightest people in the industry. They are the foundation of our success and our competitive advantage, and they bring a personal touch to everything we do.

However, COVID-19 has been a major challenge. Building a new company culture has been demanding as we have had a long period of working from home. However, recently we had a full day, face to face, where we focused on our work environment and how we want to evolve our future as one team. This is, and will be, an ongoing part of our strategic plan.

**Zeposia was recently approved by the Norwegian Decision Forum. What is BMS doing to prepare for the launch of Zeposia in Norway?**

We are extremely excited about the launch. Bringing a new drug to market would usually take months. We have a new skilled team in place and are planning for a soft launch on October 16th. We want to engage with the right stakeholders – including the patient organizations – it is beneficial for all those involved.

We have used quite a lot of remote meetings in Norway, even prior to COVID-19. The sheer size of the country makes it time-consuming and difficult to travel. Webcast meetings and training by specialists and thought leaders are, and will continue to be, widely used.

**Is Norway an important player for BMS Europe in clinical trials?**

Clinical trials are extremely important for us, as they are for the patients that get early access to new innovations. BMS has a large number of clinical trials in Norway and is one of the most research-intensive companies in the country. We have also managed to attract Phase 1 trials to Norway, by working very closely with the research community in Norway's university hospitals. There is a strong drive to increase the number of clinical trials in Norway. The challenge is dependent on several factors, such as; competence, technological equipment and the number of patients available.

**BMS' merger with Celgene has introduced a lot of innovative regenerative medicines to the company's portfolio, including CAR-T therapies. Will these medicines be coming into the Norwegian market?**

Gene therapies pose a challenge both for pricing bodies and for the Norwegian authorities. Launching these medicines is not like launching a medicine that lowers your blood pressure. These therapies are completely new and different. The Norwegian authorities need to be able to view these drugs differently. It will be necessary to look at different payment models, focused on value rather than price. We are enthusiastic about the possibilities of creating the medicine of the future.

**What are your expectations for BMS Norway in 2020 and 2021?**

BMS Norway is absolutely going to be one of Norway's largest companies in terms of value. We're growing in the Norwegian market and have close to 40 employees and will grow to 50 within the next year or two. We are a lean company with a flexible workforce and our ambition is to deliver

what we promised to deliver in 2020.

**How do you make sure that BMS Norway maintains its significance at the European level?**

Norway is a small country, but what I have seen in the last couple of years – and this has become particularly evident through COVID-19 – is that BMS in Norway is much better and more innovative than we think we are.

We need to get better at showing what we are doing, because we are doing a lot of great things. We are in a different, better, place now than we were three or four years ago.

**What lessons would you like to share with a younger generation of female leaders?**

BMS is a company that really honours diversity. Some female leaders believe that they have to be like male leaders, but many bring in new ways of thinking and acting. There are a number of female leaders in the Norwegian pharma industry. My advice to younger female leaders is to take advantage of every opening available to you. Every time you feel like you have things in control, reach for, and start, something new. Make yourself visible and take a long shot at the abundance of opportunities.

Finally, I would say to all female leaders – You are better than you think!

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