Ellen Cathrine Andersen – CEO, EpiGuard

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CEO Ellen Cathrine Andersen introduces Norwegian firm Epiguard's 'Epishuttle' technology for transporting highly contagious patients, the crucial role that the product is playing in helping to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, and where she hopes to take the company moving forward.

Please introduce yourself to our readership.

I initially trained as a nurse and later studied market economics. As a registered nurse, I started my career working in hospitals, which taught me a lot about healthcare systems, but later moved into sales. I worked in various roles selling medical devices, pharmaceuticals, and medical and industrial gases.

I worked for various companies but spent most of my career at Yara Praxair, which later became Nippon Gas. At Yara Praxair, I worked my way up to the position of Sales Director and was later promoted into the role of Scandinavian Supply Director. Prior to joining Epiguard I worked for AbbVie as Business Unit Director of Immunology; the company's largest business unit.

In 2019, I saw this opening at Epiguard which was a good opportunity to try something new and help a Norwegian company to succeed on the global stage. Epiguard realized that they needed someone more commercially minded, with a different focus and experience, to lead the company around the world. Fridtjof Heyerdahl founded Epiguard in 2015 and continues to play a vital role as

CMO. Friftjof also works as a doctor at Oslo University Hospital and works with the Norwegian Air Ambulance.

What were the key experiences you were able to bring to Epiguard?

Above all, my experiences working with the market – from both a sales and regulatory perspective – have been the most important things I have brought to EpiGuard. However, I also brought experience of building a company. Working in a big international corporation, like Praxair or AbbVie, teaches you the importance of systems and structure. Structure is very important when building a small company into an international success. Coming into Epiguard, I also carried with me a lot of experience related to marketing and sales approaches, both from my roles at big corporate firms and also from my experiences working in the market myself, very early in my career.

What key developments has Epiguard undertaken since being founded in 2015?

Epiguard was established by a group of doctors working at Oslo University Hospital, who in 2014 were given responsibility for bringing a Norwegian Ebola patient home from Sierra Leone. The patient was a doctor working with Doctors Without Borders who contracted Ebola. The team of Norwegian doctors and paramedics responsible for receiving her at Oslo Airport did a review of all existing equipment and discovered that it was lacking. The team therefore sought to create an improved product for transporting highly infectious patients, which also allows medical professionals to provide medical treatment during transport.

They began designing the product in 2015 and soon began working through the regulatory processes to get to market. These processes included rigorous testing. Finally, in late 2017, they had a commercially viable product which they began marketing to various customers including emergency services, national health services, ground and air ambulances services, and private sector companies. In 2019, we realized the need to take a more structured approach to the market, so we hired two international sales representatives who cover international markets.

Epiguard is currently focused on Europe and is aiming to succeed in all five of Europe’s biggest markets. Now, we are also looking into Asia and aiming to expand into new markets such as Japan, having already sold our product to several big hospitals in Singapore. We are also looking at entering the US and Canada through a distributor.

Could you tell our readership about Epiguard's main product, EpiShuttle?

The team that brought the product forward reviewed all existing equipment in 2014, when they had to help transport a Norwegian Ebola patient back to Norway. However, they found that existing products were not completely airtight. There was potential for leakages, meaning the existing equipment was not safe for healthcare professionals. In response, they developed a product that is completely air and liquid tight. All air that goes into the EpiShuttle travels through a filter and all air that comes out is filtered too.

It was important to make sure that healthcare professionals would be able to provide proper medical treatment whilst using the EpiShuttle. For example, there are two holes which allow healthcare workers to handle a patient's airways in case the patient needs to be sedated. There are also six other ports in the top cover, that give access to the entirety of the patient's body.

There is also a sluice bag, which allows you to sluice in medication or anything else that is needed, if you have forgotten to do so before putting the lid on. The EpiShuttle also has medical ports which allow you to put through medical or IV lines. It also has a ventilator sleeve, meaning you can put patients on a respirator and transport intensive care patients whilst at the same time providing them with medical treatment during transport.

Healthcare professionals transporting highly infectious patients need to know what they are doing. Epiguard also offers courses and provides training led by highly skilled and highly experienced instructors. We hope to continue developing both strands of the business by improving the educational line and coming out with new products.

Who are Epiguard's main clients?

Currently, Epiguard's main clients are national healthcare systems, international organisations that repatriate patients with infectious disease, military organisations, and ambulance services. More recently, a lot of air ambulance services have begun using the EpiShuttle due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Helicopter pilots are not able to wear full personal protective equipment (PPE) whilst flying. A sealed isolation unit allows patients to be flown safely, meaning they can be transported to hospital more quickly. Isolating a patient inside the EpiShuttle also means that healthcare workers do not

have to wear PPE, meaning they are less likely to suffer from fatigue.

In the future, we believe the EpiShuttle may have a role in helping to isolate patients suffering from biological or chemical hazards. We believe the EpiShuttle may have a role to play in the tourism industry as well. For example, the EpiShuttle could be used to transport patients from cruise ships to hospitals onshore.

We have now sold the Epishuttle to customers in more than 20 countries. It is playing a crucial role in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare services in COVID-19 hotspots have been overwhelmed and have begun to run out of intensive care capacity. The situation has meant hospitals have needed to transport patients to hospitals with available capacity.

Transport has played a significant role in the global response to the coronavirus pandemic. In Norway, the Royal Air Force has used the EpiShuttle to transport patients from the northern parts of the country. In Denmark, they have used our product to transport patients from islands offshore to hospitals on the mainland. In continental Europe they have also used the EpiShuttle to transport patients to hospitals in Germany.

The EpiShuttle can also be used to protect vulnerable patients from their surroundings. For example, the product can be used to protect cancer patients with compromised immune systems from their surroundings, or safeguard burn victims from the outside whilst travelling.

What are the advantages of being based in Norway?

The Norwegian government now recognises the role innovation will play in creating jobs and strengthening Norway’s economy. Norway also has an excellent healthcare system and a highly educated population. We have access to a lot of highly skilled people. Culturally, Norway is accustomed to taking up new innovations. There is not an innate fear in Norway of adopting new technology or changing processes. This means we have been able to find reference customers inside Norway, who have given us a lot of useful feedback.

However, we have faced various challenges related to the fact that Norway’s healthcare industry is very early in its development. Unlike in Sweden or Denmark, Norway does not have the same experience of building healthcare industries.

Where will Epiguard be in five years?

In five years, we hope to be established in many more markets across the globe. We are aiming to be fully established in the Asian markets, the US market, and all of the five major markets in Europe. We also hope to have a broader product portfolio. Finally, we aim to have established ourselves as a major partner to organisations handling the transport of highly infectious patients.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to change their career?

Being curious and wanting to learn new things gives you a major advantage. It is important not to be too rigid or stuck in your ways. You must be flexible and able to try new things. You also need to try and see things from different perspectives. I found my experiences working as a nurse incredibly useful, both whilst selling medical devices for Epiguard and also while selling pharmaceuticals at AbbVie.

It was useful to have experience of the healthcare system, as those experiences helped me understand what patients are like and what they need. Those experiences allowed me to see things from the point of view of a healthcare professional. It has given me a much broader view and helped me to understand the benefits new innovations can offer. Often, the cheapest option ends up becoming more expensive in the long term. Those experiences really prepared me for my later career.

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