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A concrete example of Pfizer Norway's value is our pioneering of digital channels and how we utilize these channels to communicate with physicians and the public

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Sissel Lønning Andresen explains how Pfizer Norway has been a pioneer of digital communication channels for years, what other Pfizer affiliates can learn from Norway in this field, and how it helped in terms of working through the COVID-19 pandemic. Andresen also highlights her market access priorities, with the gene therapies in Pfizer's pipeline probably necessitating innovative pricing solutions, and makes a rallying cry for more clinical trials in Norway.

Could you begin by giving our audience an introduction to your background and how you came into the role of Norway country manager at Pfizer?

I trained as a pharmacist at Oslo University and I did my master's degree in Kiel, Germany. Since then, I have always worked in the pharmaceutical industry, starting in regulatory affairs at Nycomed Amersham, which today is GE Healthcare, before moving on to Pharmacia 20 years ago, which later merged with Pfizer. I have therefore been in the Pfizer system for about 20 years.

It has been a very exciting journey to be part of. I have had different roles within regulatory, sales and marketing and have had the pleasure of working with major medicines covering a high unmet medical need. I have also worked with market access, collaborating and networking with the political system. I have had P&L responsibility for ten years and have been country manager for seven.

All these roles have come up amid wider organisational changes within Pfizer. When the country manager role became available in 2014, I was actually on maternity leave and planning to stay home for quite a while. However, it was not a difficult decision to say yes to this opportunity and I have been in the position since.

What are your current strategic priorities?

Operationally, the switch to working from home in 2020 has been a key area of focus and something that we had to get right. We've focused on keeping colleagues as safe as possible. And it has been important to ensure that platforms, including digital channels, are in place to allow colleagues to interact with physicians and continue to be strategic, creative and innovative while working from home.

Another key priority is ensuring that patients in Norway have access to Pfizer's new medicines. This is an ongoing topic as we have many new launches planned and an area in which there are several challenges. For example, in discussions with authorities, it can take some time to agree on payment models. Additionally, it is going to take even more time to prepare the ground for the gene therapies we are hoping to bring to Norway. These will be game changers in terms of medical treatment for severe diseases but will also require disruptive discussions of financing models. A gene therapy can represent a cure for a disease that can be administered in one or two shots, in contrast to current treatments which may require long-term administration. How these new therapies are valued and priced is something that Pfizer, along with the industry association LMI, is working on.

A third opportunity (and challenge) is attracting more clinical trials to Norway. The Norwegian Government recently launched an action plan for clinical trials. This plan is a result of long, hard and diligent work and collaboration from numerous people and companies in the industry and signals an important step into continued efforts to attract more clinical trials to Norway. Pfizer is looking forward to continuing to work together with the LMI and other stakeholders to anchor this plan into further commitments and concrete efforts to benefit the Norwegian health industry, healthcare, and patients.

Is the Norwegian healthcare system ready for these new therapy paradigms? Are you optimistic of being able to bring cell and gene therapy to Norway or do you foresee a lot

of roadblocks?

I am both optimistic and foresee some roadblocks. As an example, we struggle today to get agreement with the authorities even on quite simple innovative models such as price-volume models. Luckily, I think that payers and authorities are cognizant that new questions will arise and are willing to work together with industry to get around these roadblocks.

As pharma companies, our ambition is to get these new drugs to the market; an ambition which is shared by the Norwegian authorities. I am optimistic, but it will require a lot of hard work, collaboration, and “out of the box” thinking.

In your seven years as country manager, have you seen a softening of government attitudes towards the pharma industry and the input it can have?

There has been great progress in the last ten years. Now, more than ever before, we have a seat at the table and our input as a trusted partner is valued. However, when it comes to finding agreement, the devil is in the detail and a lot of negotiations are still required to agree on financing models for specific innovations.

What is the importance of Norway, given its relatively small market size, to Pfizer? Are there any particularities that make the affiliate stand out?

A concrete example of Pfizer Norway’s value is our pioneering of digital channels and how we utilize these channels to communicate with physicians and the public. Pfizer Norway is actually a frontrunner in this field within Pfizer globally and other affiliates look to us on this topic. We have quite a small organisation with a team of efficient and agile colleagues who collaborate very well to get things done and we are not afraid to try new things.

I would also mention that Norway has many health data registries with good quality data. This gives great opportunities for real world data studies.

Additionally, the Nordics and Norway have strong cost containment measures on drugs from the authorities, which can be a good thing for me as a taxpayer, but more challenging in terms of bringing innovation to market. Therefore, other European affiliates look to learn from Norway in terms of market access strategies, including managing tenders and the interchangeability of drugs between different therapeutic areas.

How helpful has this early digitalisation push been as the whole world switched to remote working and remote stakeholder interaction in the last year?

I would say we had a good foundation of digital platforms when society closed down in March 2020. The business kept going and we have managed to maintain almost the same level of interaction with physicians as in 2019 thanks to the utilisation of digital channels and webinars. But there are clearly some things and some interactions that can't be switched to digital channels. Many physicians still prefer to meet us face to face, so for us it is about the combination of physical and digital presence.

Is Pfizer Norway's portfolio broadly representative of the company's global offering? What are your key therapeutic areas of focus?

The medicines Pfizer offers to the Norwegian market are broadly in line with the rest of Europe and with Pfizer International. We have six business units in Norway across vaccines, oncology, hospital, internal medicine, rare disease, and immunology & inflammation.

We want to continue to deliver the approximately 95 drugs that we already have on the market and continue to supply vaccines. Negotiations with the Norwegian authorities are underway regarding several new innovative drugs.

How would you assess Norway's potential as a research destination, with its patient registries, highly educated population, and good basic research footprint? Is that something Pfizer is looking to leverage or contribute to in Norway?

This is a very hot topic for Pfizer and there is a lot of potential here. Pfizer is a very strong supporter of both creating real world data (RWD), but also accessing pre-existing RWD.

How was Pfizer Norway able to navigate what threatened to be a medicine supply chain crisis at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020?

This is another very important topic. When the pandemic became a fact in March 2020, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla set out three priorities: securing the health, safety and wellbeing of staff; securing

our global supply chain; and developing a medical solution for COVID-19.

Locally, we worked according to the first two priorities in close collaboration with the authorities and also with our colleagues across the region. There was a risk of medicine shortages in certain areas across the globe, including Norway, but we managed to maintain supply to Norway in more or less the same levels as we did in 2019.

Pfizer has made headline news in recent months as the first company, along with BioNTech, to get regulatory approval for a COVID-19 vaccine. To what extent is Pfizer Norway involved in the rollout of this vaccine in the country?

Our part in this process has been to work with local authorities to help them prepare for the vaccination program and secure access to the vaccine in Norway. Pfizer is responsible for logistics and shipping, but from that point onwards, it is up to local governments. Our colleagues in Norway are working very hard to secure the arrival of the doses that the Norwegian authorities have ordered.

We are also committed to provide fair and balanced information on the vaccines (within our legal framework) and to follow up on adverse event reporting and media enquiries. These are busy days for many of my colleagues.

Are Norwegians generally open to the concept of vaccines or is there much of an Anti-Vax movement in the country? Do you think this will this be a reasonably smooth process in terms of immunization?

There is very high participation in the other vaccination programs we run in Norway, above 90 percent in some cases. In general, Norwegians trust in vaccines and see their value. I also hope that when it comes to the COVID-19 vaccine, regardless of whether it is the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine or one from another company, Norwegians can see the value.

Having said that, I think it is understandable for people to be sceptical. It is therefore important that people get information from trustworthy sources; unfortunately, there is a lot of misleading information out there that can impact people’s decisions. It is therefore vital that the authorities address this scepticism and provide good quality, neutral, and balanced information so that people can make good decisions.

I hope and believe that the majority of the population who are offered a vaccine will say yes to it.

How do you attract and sustain talent at Pfizer Norway? How do you ensure a diversity of talent?

The Pfizer brand name is a key attractor of talent; we are well known as a great company to work for, which we see whenever we have an open position. There is a lot of focus on diversity – not only in terms of gender, age, or race – but also about having different people working together. A diverse team can challenge each other much more than a homogenous one. Every manager needs to be aware of this.

We also try to proactively look for different talents when we are posting positions and hiring. It is vital for hiring managers to really be aware of this.

You have been in this role for seven years, which is quite long for a country manager. What continues to make this position interesting and fulfilling?

Pfizer is a great company and, after such a long time with the firm, I know its dynamics and culture very well. Around every second year, we have organizational changes which also leads to my role changing. I thrive in change and hope to continue building experience and learning. To be honest, if you work in the pharmaceutical industry, I believe Pfizer is a great place to be. Moreover, country manager is a great role with so many different aspects, new challenges, and opportunities for learning and development. I learn something new all the time, which is great!

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