Ministry of Economy of Spain – Maria Luisa Poncela, Secretary General for Science, Technology and Innovation



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Maria Luisa Poncela has been the General Secretary of Science, Technology and Innovation under the Spanish Ministry of Economy since January 2012. In her role she fosters business competitiveness and technology transfer across different sectors and regions, and in an exclusive interview with PharmaBoardroom she outlines some of the key highlights of Spain's research capacity.

What have been some of the key successes of this department in terms of innovation over the past couple of years?

The Ministry of Economy has developed a new national strategy and plan for science and innovation, which is focused on societal challenges. The first set of these challenges we have to define is centered on health. We are now developing this plan and we have published open calls for implementing this strategy. Approximately 25 percent of all applications received have been focused on health and health-related aspects both in applied science and in the frontier of knowledge. This open call is made for public and private consortia to develop and make research and innovation for companies in which we can apply knowledge originated from universities and research institute for various topics including health, transport and energy, among others.

Generally speaking, Spain has an extraordinarily high level of research for health, in terms of knowledge, science and technology being used by Spanish companies.

You have stated that the use of innovative public procurement process would help foster innovation. Could you elaborate on this development?

The Ministry is strongly promoting the process of innovative public procurement (IPP). According to OECD, the US, Canada and Spain are the top three countries for pushing innovative public procurement, and health in particular has had a warm welcome in this area. One example of this can be seen with two hospitals in Galicia that currently use innovative public procurement, which combined represent a large portion of the €200 million being invested in this idea. But to develop IPP the government needs to communicate to society, companies and researchers that it would like to buy new technologies or innovative services. Galicia is leading the way, and some other regions are currently observing Galicia and how they operate. This involves everything related to hospitals, physicians, nurses, and administrative people as a part of defining public procurement, how they would like to introduce innovation in this procurement. It is a very open innovation implemented in these two hospitals.

You have said that Spain needs to double its investment in R&D+i, particularly in the private sector. How much of a role do you think the pharmaceutical industry needs to play in that investment?

The pharmaceutical sector is the leader in R&D in Spain. When I say it is necessary to double our investment, undoubtedly I would like to see the pharmaceutical sector play a leading role. We have a network of hospitals where physicians engage in a high level of research and have the potential to achieve great things here. Looking back ten years ago, foreign pharmaceutical companies were investing in research in Spain but mainly in the later phases of the development of a drug. But at present there are big companies investing in Spain that entirely develop a drug here, from preclinical until the last phase of clinical. This is a great path for Spanish knowledge and science, because many physicians of different hospitals are involved, as well as researchers of Spain’s leading institutes.

Another big part of pharmaceutical industry and innovation is the high presence of biotech companies in Spain. What is the potential for Spain’s biotech sector to grow, and can it obtain the necessary funding to succeed?

I think the potential of these companies is enormous. Many of them come from university spinoffs and from the national institutes for research. The products that they develop usually have the

objective of being sold to big pharma, and such products are developed with a very high quality of research. This quality research is interesting big pharma, as many developments have a current focus on personalized medicine. For example, the Spanish genomics company Oryzon recently closed an agreement with Roche to research and develop a drug for a specific cancer, which was strategic for both companies. You can translate this exercise to other small companies in the biotech sector in Spain that are also developing high quality products for pharma, many of which are already in Phase I/II and only need the total data from Phase II trials to sell to a big pharmaceutical company.

The Ministry of Economy is encouraging these developments in the biotech sector not only to open calls that we have here, but to provide loans to the companies to do such things. Our strategy is focused on capital risk. We are closing agreements with different initiatives from different financial institutions, not only from Spain but also from countries like the United States, who has invested with government funds and capital from financial institutions for the equity of biotech companies. We need to give them loans to invest in research but private equity is fundamental as well.

What would you like to have achieved for Horizon 2020, and where can we expect to find Spain in terms of being a competitive country in innovation?

We are supporting our agents strongly in order to fulfill the objectives of Horizon 2020, not only because research costs a lot, but also because it is a program that mainly provides money in open calls in a very competitive environment between researchers. Successful open calls provide the capital necessary not only to engage in research but also ensure high quality innovation and a strong positioning for receiving EU grants. This is a very good opportunity to achieve that level of excellence because only the most excellent proposals will be financed. It also provides the opportunity to internationalize the teams and increase the network with international agents. The Ministry of Economy also supports companies to go to Horizon 2020 because we recognize that we have strong teams with dedicated people researching in Spain that just need the international exposure to succeed. That is why we want these people to be excellent not only in Spain, but in Europe and worldwide. I believe that Spain’s researchers in the pharmaceutical and biotech sectors have enough good quality and excellence to be leaders in many of those proposals, and they are doing so at present. Spain is ranked fifth in Europe for winning open proposals in consolidation grants. That means our research is truly excellent. We will continue to be ambitious and try to do even better in our ranking for grants. Leaders in Spain will become leaders in Europe.

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