Peter Simonsbacka – Chairman, Swedish Labtech, Sweden

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Swedish Labtech is an industry organization for companies involved in laboratory activities. Chairman Peter Simonsbacka discusses the challenges facing the life science industry, the opportunity to bring back the strong clinical trials tradition in the country and the unique Swedish collaborative ecosystem.

What are the main strengths and challenges of the Swedish laboratory industry?

It is definitively an innovative industry, which goes back to the roots of the life science industry in Sweden. One of the goals of the industry today is to bring back the strong clinical trials tradition we used to have. The efforts should go towards helping hospitals and doctors find more time to dedicate to clinical trials and research. The country has the right tools to achieve that mission.

What is the main focus of the association at the moment and some of the concerns of its members?

We have a very diverse group of members, from multinational companies to small distribution companies. The key objective of the association is to influence the different stakeholders. We need to have a broader conversation with hospitals to better deal with the purchasing mechanisms. But also, with politicians to explain how instrumental the industry is to the whole life science ecosystem. Our members are the ones behind the research, supporting academia and several other initiatives.

A recurring theme we hear from the members is related to public tendering because the Swedish healthcare system, to a large extent, works through tenders. There have been some undesired developments in recent years, and it is an area in which we work with academic institutions and payers to get a common understanding. If Sweden wants to become the most successful research country in the world, both sides have to be on the same page. We increased the focus on those kinds of conversations a couple of years ago after there was an issue with a tender. That served as a turning point and both sides understood that we have a common goal. Having open channels of communications makes a great difference, we now meet at least two times a year with the purchasing managers. That has been something our members really appreciate.

What are some specific measures that the public sector should consider?

Digitalization is one area that has to be on the agenda. If you look at how the Swedish system is organized, you find many different regions and systems. In many cases, hospitals do not have access to patients' records made in another region. The data available must be used in a more efficient way, we need solutions to be able to find a balance between respecting privacy protections and using the data to the advantage of patients and the system as a whole. Some of our members sell diagnostics kits that can really improve diagnosis and treatment and they could be used more efficiently. The system should allow doctors to see what tests have been done, so they can continue looking at something else, instead of repeating the same test.

What measures can be taken to increase the number of clinical trials in Sweden?

It is a matter of how the healthcare system is organized and what is the benefit for the hospitals. The issue today is that they do not have the time to do them, so there must be incentives for hospitals. Looking back 15 years, they appeared to have time to spend on studies, there was a sense of pride in contributing to R&D. It was easier in the past to approach a hospital and ask them

to try out new diagnostics equipment to understand if it had an impact on the operations, but it is much more difficult to find the time nowadays.

How can the Swedish industry better adapt to new technological changes and remain a leading innovation powerhouse?

It has been almost ten years since the inception of the SciLifeLab, which is a fantastic initiative that helps to bring together Uppsala, Stockholm and other regions.

Many of our members on the distribution side are very involved in that type of initiatives. I must say that technologic changes are happening so fast that small innovation companies are coming up with great products and ideas. Part of that innovation is picked up from those small suppliers by distribution companies They also accelerate the innovation process by providing the small players help to take them to the next level. The landscape will most likely change because of new regulations but we are seeing many Swedish companies making great progress in finding new products.

Why should life science companies choose Sweden as the place to do business in?

Sweden has a very open environment when it comes to working together. There is a great degree of innovation happening right now. Academia is a good example of a sector that is trying to share and learn from others. The quality of the universities is also something that should be considered, we are talking about a high-skilled workforce that is eager to contribute to innovative initiatives. Sustainability is another key part of the Swedish life science ecosystem.

What do you hope to change in the Swedish landscape in the next five years?

Hopefully, we will get some of the initiatives I referred to in place. There is a large discussion around changing primary care because today, around 80 per cent of the money is spent on chronic diseases. Patients with chronic diseases should not just sit on emergency rooms taking up time. They should instead be going more to the primary care providers, and, of course, they should get more funds to be able to expand their reach. It could be achieved by providing them with the ability to conduct more diagnostic tests, so they provide faster treatments. The budget can be spent in a more efficient way.

On the other side, one aspect that provides optimism is that today’s generation is geared towards lifestyle changes, which is positive if we expect to have a healthier population. Prevention is always better than a cure.

I believe everybody should also take a good look at the upcoming demographic changes; we might end up living past 100 years. That presents a great challenge to the system. Another challenge, which is driven by politics, is the short-term vision, not always being able to look beyond what will happen in four years. The changes that the industry needs are in the long-term, I am referring to measures that could take more than 15 years to show results. There should be a commitment to change the mindset around certain issues, mainly by having a closer relationship to show the importance of the industry to Sweden’s innovative capabilities. If all the different organizations have the same message, it will be easier to get it across. That is where the effort has been going.

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