Janet Hoogstraate – Chair of the Management Board, Valneva Sweden



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Infectious diseases kill over 17 million people each year, according to the WHO, which is why vaccine-specialist Valneva is continuing to grow and develop the next generation of vaccines. Janet Hoogstraate, chair of the Management Board of Valneva Sweden, explains the high-quality of their manufacturing operations in the country and the company's commitment to Sweden and its current development of vaccines against Lyme disease, and Chikungunya.

Can you begin by introducing Valneva and your therapeutic focus on vaccines to our audience?

Valneva is a biotech company with French and Austrian origins and is the product of the merger between Vivalis and Intercell in 2013. From the very beginning, it has been a vaccine biotech company focusing on developing, manufacturing and commercializing vaccines in the area of infectious diseases, more specifically, travel vaccines.

The first product developed by Valneva was Ixiaro, a vaccine against Japanese encephalitis for travelers visiting endemic areas; it has been on the market for ten years and is manufactured by Valneva in Livingston, Scotland. We plan to manufacture our chikungunya vaccine at the same facility.

In 2015, Valneva acquired Crucell Sweden AB from Janssen. The acquisition included all assets, licenses, and rights related to Dukoral, a vaccine against cholera and in some countries approved against travelers' diarrhea caused by ETEC, as well as a vaccine distribution business for the Nordics and the manufacturing plant here in Stockholm.

The entirety of our Dukoral production, one of our two approved vaccines, is executed here. In Sweden, we also manufacture clinical trial material for a cancer vaccine from Austrian company Hookipa Biotech GmbH, based on a Nobel Prize-winning technology.

How did the Hookipa partnership with Valneva materialize?

Like most partnerships, it began by having the right interactions at the right time. I met with Hookipa's VP for external manufacturing and we began talking about technology and their needs for GMP manufacturing. At the time, an assignment was not imminent, but we followed up a year later in Vienna, which happens to be where both Hookipa and Valneva are based. Certainly, Valneva's reputation gave us an edge; the work we did with Janssen on the polio vaccine was very much appreciated by Janssen. The team in Sweden is not only knowledgeable and experienced but takes pride in taking accountability for their work. The Hookipa partnership began with a smaller assignment for one year and we now have a full three-year contract with them. The partnership has been an outstanding opportunity for us. In order to produce on a 200-liter scale, we are building a new Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP)-production facility at our premises.

Could you explain the strengths of your manufacturing capabilities and why does Valneva continue to put a high degree of trust in the Swedish operations?

It is important to understand the magnitude of the knowledge and experience of our people in the Swedish plant as aforementioned. The larger Stockholm area and Sweden, in general are great places to recruit high-skilled employees. The universities in the area are recognized worldwide and also there have been major developments in terms of education on levels below university.

Moreover, when you look at the history of the country, you see the origins of Astra, now AstraZeneca, or Pharmacia, now Pfizer, whereby these two companies left behind a well-trained workforce when they downsized their R&D organizations here. They also invested in manufacturing capabilities in Sweden. Both for R&D and manufacturing, the whole ecosystem is capable of maintaining and producing incredible talent.

What are Valneva’s R&D operations in Sweden?

The R&D operations here are directly linked to our clinical and commercial manufacturing processes and analytical assays. Clinical development is steered from the Vienna office.

Looking into your portfolio, what is the status of Valneva’s drug pipeline?

We are very proud to have two leading clinical development programs. The first one is the most advanced clinical-stage vaccine to prevent Lyme disease. The other is a vaccination against chikungunya disease. We hope to bring them to the market as soon as possible to meet the current unmet medical need for these two diseases. In addition to those two vaccine candidates, where we invest heavily and focus most of our R&D resources, we have some earlier stage programs.

Additionally, we are interested in increasing our portfolio via acquisitions that can complement our two successful vaccines currently on the market.

The Nordic markets represented ten percent of Valneva’s total product sales last year, which was more than the UK. Could you assess the importance of the Nordics and Sweden for Valneva as a whole?

Dukoral which is produced entirely in Sweden, is an important source of revenue for Valneva. Over the past few years, we have been able to almost double the number of doses sold. The job of our teams around the world has been fantastic with respect to the Dukoral vaccine, especially taking into account that the product was de-prioritized when owned by Janssen. With such a big portfolio, the vaccine was understandably not a priority for them, but for Valneva, with its size and focus on travel vaccines, we have been able to capitalize on its potential. Of course, it helps that the vaccine market is growing because global healthcare systems but also patients understand that prevention is way more desirable and cost effective than treatment.

One of the reasons behind the success in the Nordic market, specifically, is that the countries are very receptive to vaccines. The level of skepticism is not as pronounced as other countries, for example in France. Talking specifically about Sweden, the country has among the highest penetration rates among travelers for both our vaccines. On the downside, Sweden does not have a large population, which reduces the scale of our sales, but not our impact.

Helena Strigård, CEO SwedenBio, recently said that while Sweden may seem like an expensive place to manufacture, in reality, the country is very competitive, not only when it comes to competence and productivity but also in actual costs. What do you perceive as the advantages of Sweden as a manufacturing destination?

I agree, the perception tends to be that Sweden can be prohibitively expensive, but the reality is that salaries are competitive. While it can be perceived as an expensive country to live in, with higher taxes, the population sees a return; whether it is on healthcare, security, or infrastructure. It is a great country to live in, with an affordable childcare system too. Other examples I can mention include the stability of the economy which is attractive for foreign investors, electricity is quite cheap, and the political system is very supportive. There is a strong focus on higher education not only for research purposes but also to make products.

Of course, there is still a lot to be done, but the perception that Sweden is very expensive and that they have long summer holidays is not necessarily accurate.

Janet, you have been leading Valneva in Sweden for over three years now. What have been your main accomplishments during your tenure?

I am very proud of the engagement of the employees, and I consider it to be one of my best accomplishments. We have recruited talented people and being able to retain key staff after the Janssen handover. An important element of Valneva is its culture; we have involved the employees so they understand that they can influence the company as much as it influences them. People are not afraid to speak up, which is crucial in a regulated environment. Although activities may be written down, people are not afraid to stand up and question the integrity of what they are doing and whether this is the most efficient way to achieve things.

Where do you hope to see Valneva in Sweden in the next three years?

The company’s strategy is to expand its portfolio. Within three years, I would like to have an additional vaccine product being manufactured here. I believe that we are capable of taking on a second commercial product. On the other hand, Dukoral still has room to grow and Valneva is investing substantially in modernizing the plant; we are upgrading our production facilities to increase production and to comply with upcoming regulations.

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