
After ten years of diabetes R&D at Novo Nordisk, Dorte X. Gram took her findings and work further to start something on her own. As founder and CEO of PILA PHARMA she hopes to bring a new oral anti-diabetic agent to the market.

TEXT by ANNELI HIDALGO

Denmark
“THE SCIENTIST IN ME WANTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE”

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What made you take the leap to go on your own?

“Having worked in the diabetes business since 1999 I understand diabetics and the diabetes market and I have learned how to develop new diabetes drugs. I believe that type 2 diabetes is an inflammatory disease that should be treated as such. This is what we hope to do with our development candidate that will soon enter the first clinical trials in diabetics. As a young scientist, I by coincidence discovered that if you block the ‘chili-receptor’ we could treat diabetes in rats. Now, many years later, it is thrilling to be so close to see if it also works in human diabetics. And if I’m right, it could really be a big thing for the diabetics. I feel that if you firmly believe you’re on to – a new way to treat diabetes – then you are obliged to pursue the idea until proof (or not). Of course there’s also a high risk that this is not an effective treatment. No matter what I think it is important to dare to take the risk for things or projects you believe in.”

In what way has your scientific background been of use to you?

“I have gained much knowledge about everything from early stage research to development processes and patenting from my time at Novo Nordisk. My time in R&D also taught me that in drug development there are high demands on ‘time, quality and cost’. This also applies in biotech, but in addition to being scientifically strong in your area you need to be visionary and to understand the different phases of the overall project. At Novo Nordisk I learned to have the patient in focus as well as understanding the competitive landscape – both now and in the future and to ‘start with the end’ when you initiate a new drug project. Meaning – you have to know your goal and then to plan backwards. Then it’s no longer ‘how’ but ‘when’ you achieve your goal.”

After many years of living and working in Denmark you are now operating from Malmö. How would you describe operating in the Danish/Swedish life science industry?

“The incubator system in Sweden is really fantastic in being so focused in actively facilitating new companies lift-off. I did not experience the same kind of start-up support in Denmark when establishing other companies there. First of all they offer you a cost-free start-up and a business toolbox via their ‘Entrepreneurs programme’.

Network is crucial and Medeon with their partners, Connect in Skåne and Invest in Skåne, professionally open up to network that start-ups would not otherwise have access to. ALMI has also played an important role for PILA PHARMA, investing twice in the company and granting an innovation loan. My feeling is that Swedes really like and support if you are ambitious, goal oriented and work hard for you project. They really want you to succeed and the tradition in Sweden that private persons invest in new companies is really fundamental to the success of start-ups – especially in biotech where it’s a lot about money – but also endurance that can be affected by good-will from the surroundings. In Skåne there is a great atmosphere of innovation and investing in new projects and a drive to promote growth in the region.”

What is your advice to other life science researchers and entrepreneurs?

“Believe in your concept – and in yourself. Make sure that you have the competence that is required or surround yourself with people who do. No one can take care of everything and the sooner you realize that, the better. Also, I think it is important to enjoy and have fun with what you do. It’s a long process and you don’t know where it will end up. So enjoy the ride, ‘network, network, network’ and never give up. Communication is also crucial. My motto is say what you do and do what you say. Be honest and transparent, don’t make promises that you can’t keep. Then you will have greater reliability and credibility.”

For my own sake there’s a risk that I end up with nothing. That’s why I have not put myself in a risky financial situation, with no debts or loans. At the same time, I’ve spent the past five years with a substantially lower annual income. This kind of undertaking and commitment takes perseverance and the time and energy that you invest need to culminate in something. For me the obvious culmination of course will be to prove that I was right – that if you block the chili-receptor you can treat diabetes in a new and better way and change the life for many diabetics. But, if I’m proved wrong, I have had the chance to do what I love most – to be innovative and visionary and – together with so many fantastic people try to make a difference for other people. That may in the end be the most important part of this project.”

