

Québec pharma policy must be looked at as a whole, not piece by piece

By PAUL LÉVESQUE

The multi-faceted approach to developing a thriving biopharmaceutical industry in Québec over the past 30 years is one of the great triumphs of Québec public policy.

It has reaped impressive rewards, making Québec the centre of biopharmaceutical research for all of Canada, leading to billions of dollars of investments and the creation of thousands of jobs. With only 25% of the Canadian population, the province of Québec attracts close to 45% of R&D investments in Canada by research-based pharmaceutical companies.

Along with well-paying jobs, both directly with the pharma companies and with the hundreds of other businesses which supply them goods and services, Québec's universities, hospitals and research institutions have been immeasurably strengthened by industry investments and the creation of a critical mass of specialized talent. And millions of Quebecers have benefited from the vaccines and treatments made available, contributing greatly to the vast improvements in overall health and life expectancy we have enjoyed over recent decades.

One of the key elements that has made this sectoral policy so successful is the partnership approach between government and the biopharmaceutical industry, working together to create an environment that is beneficial to all Québec. The key to any partnership is dialogue. As a result, there are regular discussions to air issues and to ensure Québec can take the long-term decisions necessary to ensure its policies will continue their great track record of success.

One of the recent issues which has arisen is criticism of the Québec policy under which the public drug plan agrees to reimburse brand-name medicines for 15 years after their listing on the formulary, providing patients and physicians an important option between the brand-name medicine and its copy (also called a generic drug). The intent of this policy, known as Best Available Price for 15 years or BAP-15, is to encourage the pharmaceutical industry to pursue R&D of innovative medicines in Québec.

The province benefits from the investments made because of the BAP-15 policy. For example, over the past decade Pfizer globally has had three mergers with other major pharmaceutical companies, each time the province of Québec gained more than its share of jobs as well as maintaining the Pfizer Canada headquarters in Montreal. Each time, the decision was taken to move the work of those companies to the Pfizer Canada headquarters in Montreal. And earlier this year, Pfizer announced a major restructuring of its manufacturing operations globally, involving the cutting of 6,000 jobs and the closing many plants. One of the ones not closed was the major Pfizer manufacturing facility in St-Laurent, with its more than 900 jobs, including 200 positions in R&D functions.

Why have all these jobs been able to come to and stay in Québec? A major reason was the favourable environment created by Québec's long-standing policies. Research-based pharmaceutical companies work on a global basis, now more than ever. The biggest competition I face in getting my company to invest in Canada and Québec is from my colleagues in other

countries. Québec's favourable policies allow me to protect investments here and seek new ones.

The secret to the success of Québec's biopharmaceutical policy is that each element has been developed and fostered by looking not just at its immediate or direct effect but also at how it fits into the overall industry policy framework, and how it can work for long-term benefit. We must avoid a narrow view of just looking at individual elements over the short term.

Instead, we must continue to ensure those policies are considered collectively and over the long term for the overall benefit they produce, not as individual pieces to be tinkered with independently for fleeting and illusory gain in the short term, but harmful in the mid and long terms.

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