



# MERCK

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## Patients First:

### A Conversation with New Merck Canada Inc. President and Managing Director Chirfi Guindo

#### What was your career path leading to your appointment as President of Merck Canada?

You could say that I'm very much a Merck product. My background is in electrical engineering, which is the field I worked in briefly before deciding to switch. I then went to grad school in finance and joined Merck in the US on the financial side exactly 25 years ago.

After two years, I became a sales rep in New York City. I carried the bag, as they say, and really got into the trenches. This was the best possible training. I had the opportunity to work directly with customers, while selling to hospitals and clinics, which gave me a lot of joy and satisfaction. From there, I stayed on the commercial side for the remaining 20-some years. During that period, I had the opportunity to head operations in the Netherlands and South Africa before returning to the United States.

More recently, I led the Merck Global HIV business. And, just under a year ago, I had the opportunity to come here. In many ways, Canada fits perfectly with



▲ Chirfi Guindo,  
President and Managing Director,  
Merck Canada Inc.

my background and experiences — it's Europe, and it's North America. As far as I'm concerned, Canada has it all. From my perspective, it's a dream job.

#### Give us a brief overview of Merck's history and mission in Canada.

As you know, Merck has a proud legacy in research. Our company has brought many new therapies to the world. However, it's also

#### Two minutes with Chirfi Guindo

? **If you were not working in the pharmaceutical industry, what would you be doing instead?**

I'd be a soccer coach. I played soccer when I was young but wasn't good enough, so I hit the books instead. Today, I coach my son's team and get lots of satisfaction from seeing youngsters grow.

? **Which superpower would you like to possess, and why?**

To visit any country and instantly speak the language. I have a French background, and I learned Dutch in three months when I worked in Holland. So, I like languages.

? **If you could eliminate one thing from your daily schedule, what would it be?**

Spam emails. They make the day very inefficient.

fair to say that our recent research output hasn't been as productive, in part due to the "patent cliff." The good news is that we're embarking on an exciting period of high growth and high innovation.

We're still a powerhouse, but we've streamlined our research focus, and, at the same time, we've opened things up. By that, I mean we collaborate more with academic institutions, other companies, and biotechs across Canada, where we fund good science, and the outcomes are available to Merck and others. That's one model in Canada. The other model is more direct, proprietary research, which happens in-house or in collaboration with centres of expertise.

Canada is blessed with high concentrations of scientists and institutions that the world looks up to. Recently, I was in Toronto meeting with the Structural Genomics Consortium (SGC). This is a world-class, Ontario-based initiative Merck is partnering with to develop a platform in epigenetics. Right here in Québec, our team has partnered with the Consortium de recherche en oncologie clinique, which is developing biomarker-driven research in cancer.

We have many similar investments across Canada, and, through these collaborations, we have the opportunity to discover new medicines and retain top scientific talent in this country. Without such funding

and partnerships, these scientists could potentially leave. So, the Merck \$90-million investment in partnerships over the past five years represents both a scientific and an economic gain for the country. Don't forget, every dollar Merck funds has a strong leverage effect that benefits Canada's entire scientific community and, indeed, Canada's economy.

### **What are the current therapeutic focuses of Merck in Canada?**

Merck has a strong heritage in primary care. We're recognized as a powerhouse in cardiovascular and metabolic diseases and in diabetes; in fact, Merck is still among the leaders on the diabetes front. Our company is also very strong in vaccines and animal health. In the respiratory area, Singulair® is a huge global product developed right here in Canada.

From the Schering-Plough merger a few years ago, Merck gained further strengths in immunology, respiratory diseases, and virology — a real broadening of scope in terms of therapeutic areas. Today, Merck remains strong in all these areas and is entering into immuno-oncology in a major way.

### **Given these strengths, what does the Merck product pipeline look like?**

Like I said, Merck is entering a phase of exciting growth and

## **? Tell us something most people don't know about you.**

In college in France, I started a jazz radio program with some classmates. As engineering students, we were pretty nerdy, but the show was a success. I play the saxophone and congas, and, when I lived in New York, I'd go to Central Park to jam with others. I know there's something similar here in Montréal, on Mount Royal. I'll have to give it a try.

## **? Is there anything you can't live without?**

I can't live without music — jazz, Afro-Cuban, West African blues...

## **? What are the top three things on your bucket list?**

Surprisingly, given my interest in music, I haven't been to Cuba. Second, get to know Canada. And third, get to know each individual province.

## **? What's your favourite hobby? Are you any good at it?**

I really enjoy cooking. So, on weekends, I'm the chef. I do Italian and French, and I'm fond of paellas, West African dishes, Moroccan couscous... It all helps me relax and stay zen. That and the music.

preparing to launch no fewer than eight new products over the next two years. Let's start with Gardasil® 9.

Gardasil has been available for some time, and now we've just launched Gardasil® 9, which provides more coverage against nine HPV types. So, this is a pretty exciting product. Another is Keytruda®, the first in a new class of immuno-oncology medicines. Keytruda is approved for metastatic melanoma, but this molecule is truly transformative. Because of its unique mode of action, it appears to be highly effective against many other cancer types. As we speak, Keytruda is being tested against 30 different cancers. Merck, along with a couple of other companies, is a leader in this field and gives new hope to cancer patients.

These are just two examples. Our team is also coming out strong with a treatment for hepatitis C and a range of biosimilars and allergy medications. Like I said, it's a full pipeline.

### To what do you attribute Merck's success?

Let me quote from a plaque hanging outside my office. George W. Merck said, "We try never to forget that medicine is for people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow." All of us have joined this company for the same reason. Our drive really is to put the patient first. Like Merck said, if we put the patient first, profits will follow.



▲ Dr. William C. Campbell, a retired scientist from the Merck Research Laboratories, was jointly named the 2015 Nobel Prize winner in Physiology or Medicine with Satoshi Omura for the discovery of avermectin, which led to Merck's development of Mectizan (ivermectin), a treatment for river blindness (also known as onchocerciasis) in Africa, Latin America, and Yemen. Established over 25 years ago, the Mectizan Donation Program is the longest-running disease-specific drug donation program and public-private partnership of its kind.

This priority explains why Merck has been engaged in so many global health challenges. For the past 25 years or so, Merck has been collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO), academics, governments, and communities to successfully fight river blindness in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.

For over 30 years, we've done similar work in HIV and AIDS. I'm proud to have led the Merck team that partnered with the Gates Foundation, communities, and academics to put together transformative projects in southern Africa — so transformative that HIV is now considered a chronic, treatable disease in that country. Because of this long legacy, the

WHO approached Merck to join the global fight against Ebola. Once our leaders took on this challenge, we learned about a Canadian vaccine, rVSV-ZEBOV, discovered by Public Health Agency of Canada labs in Winnipeg and licensed to a Minnesota company called NewLink Genetics.

Merck has since entered into a licensing agreement with NewLink to accelerate the vaccine's development and has been working with Médecins Sans Frontières and various ministries of health. According to a recent study from New Guinea, the interim clinical results look extremely promising for this vaccine candidate. But, again, it's early days and not yet time to celebrate.



▲ Merck employees in Canada joined Merck for Mothers in creating Mama Kits to help support the health and safety of new mothers and their newborns in rural regions of Haiti. In just under two hours, colleagues assembled 9,600 items and created 800 Mama Kits.

### Have you launched any new initiatives you'd like to share with us?

Some time ago, our CEO, Ken Frazier, asked how the best minds, expertise, and resources of Merck can tackle the unacceptable phenomenon of maternal mortality. Mr. Frazier's vision is that no mother should die giving life. This led to Merck for Mothers, a major initiative that's done some tremendous work in Africa and India, for example. Just three years into the initiative, Merck for Mothers has approximately 75 partners in over 30 countries and is impacting 4.8 million women.

Now, it's time to do something right here in Canada. My team and I recognize that there's a huge unmet need in maternal health in Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal women die during childbirth more than twice the rate of non-Aboriginal women. The troubling reality is that many Aboriginal women still do not receive the care they need for a safe and healthy pregnancy and childbirth. Many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women lack access to quality, culturally sensitive maternal health care and are at an increased risk of poor maternal health outcomes. And so, we're talking with these communities, provinces, academics, and others to address this huge health care access gap.

### What key business objectives and priorities have you set for Merck Canada?

Our eight major product launches over the next few years will

**? What's the one thing you've done that you never want to do again?**

Run a marathon without proper preparation. I finished but paid the price.

**? If you could spend a day with anyone (dead or alive), who would it be, and why?**

As a young engineer, I was fascinated by Marie Curie — a Polish scientist who was so brave and brilliant that she left Poland, her homeland, for France and won two Nobels.

**? If you were to compete in the Olympics, what would be your event?**

I've recently picked up cycling, so that would be my event.

**? What is the best piece of advice you have received, and from whom did it come?**

I am blessed to have received a lot of good advice. But one senior executive at Merck said, "You've done well in engineering, done well in finance, and those were easy. Now comes the hard part — managing people. Your success will depend on your ability to make people better." I'll never forget that.



return Merck Canada to high growth and high innovation, all with the goal of serving patients.

But, there are several added priorities I'm working on with my team. Right now, for example, there is a high mortality rate in Canada that no one likes to talk about and that has to do with antimicrobial resistance, both in humans and in animals. This is an underappreciated challenge to undertake because there are so few tools and because companies haven't invested in developing medicines to attack resistant bacteria.

Merck has a long history of over 80 years in infectious disease research, which was recently strengthened through the acquisition of Cubist Pharmaceuticals, based outside of Boston. As a result, our team is coming up with new anti-infective therapies that are highly effective in neutralizing resistant bacteria. However, we now need a comprehensive, global strategy to move forward. Governments need to address challenges that limit the development of new antibiotics and also need to ensure reimbursement for appropriate antibiotic use.

Another challenge is the very human tendency to rest on your laurels. Take Januvia®, one of the world's top anti-diabetics, for example. Our team has recently presented a major five-year study at the American Diabetes Association Scientific Sessions that examined Januvia's long-term cardiovascular safety. I believe that's part of our responsibility — to revisit and demonstrate, where possible, the



▲ Views of Merck's new head office facility, situated in Kirkland, Québec. The company has maintained its head offices in the West Island community since 1969.

continuing value of our innovations to patients and payers in Canada. That's rarely done, and it differentiates Merck.

### How does Canada differ from other countries you've worked in?

I touched on how exciting it is for me personally, because Canada truly embodies the best of working in Europe and the United States. However, Canada also comes with its own unique challenges. One of these is ensuring that Canadians get the fastest possible access to new

therapies, especially in disease areas where patients have limited options. This is difficult given Canada's fragmented provincial markets and the limited budgets every payer deals with. Resulting delays impact patient care, which is our number one priority at Merck.

But, I'm optimistic. We must continue to work closely with regulators, governments, and the widest range of partners. If we do that, I'm confident that goodwill and creative problem solving will lead to the best possible solutions for patients.

**CPM**