In His Life and in His Lifetime

Bending Research to Tap the Promise of a New Multiple Sclerosis Treatment

In eulogizing his slain brother 34 years ago, U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy lumped the collective throat of a heartbroken nation with his brother's own words: "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were and say why not?" This ability to envision more clearly that to which we aspire, and then find the courage to act on it, is one of the more ennobling aspects of strategic consultancy as a career. It may have been one of the things that attracted BCG alumnus Scott Johnson to the firm not so many years ago. Today it's an apt description of his effort to create a working consortium to find a way to alleviate the suffering of people afflicted with multiple sclerosis (MS). It's a challenge made all the more personal by the fact that he's lived with the disease for more than 25 years.

Multiple sclerosis is a disease of the central nervous system that currently has no cure. For reasons that are still a mystery to researchers, the body's systems attack the myelin coating of the nerve, disrupting signals and causing the nerve itself to degenerate. Further confounding researchers is the fact that the disease seems to include a genetic, a viral, and an environmental component. Although several big pharmaceutical companies, the National Institutes of Health, and the Multiple Sclerosis Society all fund research, that research is primarily focused on immunology to find a cure—a goal that even the Multiple Sclerosis Society estimates is still decades away.

But for Scott, hope for halting further damage and restoring lost function came in the form of an article in *Business Week* spotlighting new research and discoveries in studies of the human central nervous system (CNS). It was based on new findings that indicated for the first time that CNS cells, like other cells in the body, are not static but instead continue to grow and regenerate. This new information led Scott to contact experts in the field to assess what was known. These experts said they believed that CNS repair was now, indeed, an achievable goal but that funding levels did not reflect recent breakthroughs.

Armed with this ray of hope and a solid understanding of how strategy is transformed into results, Scott then set about gauging the efficiency and effectiveness of the current myelin-repair research effort. What he found was that most of the research efforts in the field were narrowly focused and, more important, were being conducted in a vacuum, with no overall research plan and no coordination between studies to share results and eliminate redundant efforts.

Scott's response was to propose a united effort by business executives and scientists from many universities in a consortium that would apply business principles to an academic undertaking in hope of accelerating progress. It would be loosely based on the research coordination structure of the Johns Hopkins ALS Center, which requires collaboration among scientists as they conduct performance-driven research focused on therapies. Scott's approach would also share the research funding philosophy of the Howard Hughes Foundation: giving the best minds in the field the most time and money

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possible and then just letting them do their stuff. To test the viability and potential efficacy of the consortium model, Scott and a group of Silicon Valley executives (including BCG alum Bobby Mehta) put together a conference of myelin experts in June of 2002. The scientists embraced the model and felt it would result in drug targets in 5 years instead of 15. Each of the scientists also asked to be included in the consortium.

Scott's business advisory group has created a business plan and is now actively seeking $80,000 of seed funding. Among other tasks, the seed money will allow the team to detail the research plan, refine operational mechanics, and raise $2 million to fund the consortium for the first three years. Several BCG officers have contacted him to share knowledge and make introductions to contacts in the pharmaceutical industry.

To learn what you can do as part of BCG's Alumni Network, please contact Scott Johnson, founder of the Myelin Repair Foundation, at 408-871-2410 or by e-mail at scott@myelinrepair.org.

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