JUAN DIEGO REYES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

CHRISTOPHER GREGORY-RIVERA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Novo Nordisk's facility in Clayton, N.C. "We have more assets than people are giving us credit for," said Mike Doustdar, chief executive, right. "In a world where people need more treatment medications, it's not a zero-sum game."

Novo Nordisk Chief Says the Second Act Is in the Pipeline

FROM FIRST BUSINESS PAGE

tions, it's not a zero-sum game."

Customers, Not Patients

Mr. Doustdar's desire to bring a new energy to the company, and revive its fortunes, is evident in the intense way he talks about the company's naysayers. His voice is often loud, even assertive. "We haven't lost it," he said.

He took over in August 2025 in uncomfortable circumstances. The previous chief executive had been forced out a few months earlier by the company's principal shareholder and board member, the Novo Nordisk Foundation. In October, the company's chair and all the independent board members quit.

The situation became more fraught after Lars Rebien Sorensen, the chair of the foundation's board, installed himself as chair of the company's board. The dual role of Mr. Sorensen, who is also a former chief executive of Novo, unnerved some shareholders, including Norway's oil fund.

But drastic change was necessary. Novo began the modern era of weight-loss drugs, known collectively as GLP-1s, but had lost much of its lead to competition from Eli Lilly and cheaper compounding pharmacies. And there had been a steady drumbeat of bad news: profit warnings, forced price cuts, disappointing trials and slowing prescription growth.

In a first, painful step, Novo laid off about 9,000 employees, the largest restructuring in Danish corporate history.

One big shift in the past year has been rhetorical. Mr. Doustdar speaks frequently about serving customers, not just treating patients. He wants the company to cater to anyone who needs the drugs, without judgment about why. Being able to buy weight-loss drugs with a prescription, but without an in-person doctor's visit, can support people who suffer from shame and depression because of their weight, he said.

That has raised the question — internally and externally — whether Novo is becoming a cosmetics company. This debate, Mr. Doustdar said, is a distraction.

"We have science that works and is safe and efficacious, and there are customers that need it," he said. "It's irresponsible not to go in that direction."

An American Mind-Set

Novo Nordisk has sharpened its commercial instincts — and its elbows — as Mr. Doustdar seeks to prove the company's best days aren't in the past.

It is rebranding Rybelsus, which in 2019 was the first semaglutide pill approved for Type 2 diabetes, to "the Ozempic pill," belatedly taking advantage of the brand recognition. The company is also increasingly litigious. It had taken legal action against more than 150 companies over various claims, and last month sued Eli Lilly over "deceptive advertising" in the United States.

The company is starting to appear more American. Even with its 103-year Danish history, Novo makes more than half of its sales in the United States, where it employs 10,000 people. The number of Novo workers in Denmark shrank by 13 percent last year but grew in the United States by the same proportion.

Whether consciously or not, that shift is a reflection of Mr. Doustdar. He is the company's first non-Danish leader. He was born in Iran and is an Austrian national who grew up in the United States. Mr. Doustdar has been at Novo Nordisk for more than 30 years, but primarily in international operations, so he had never worked at headquarters in the Copenhagen suburbs.

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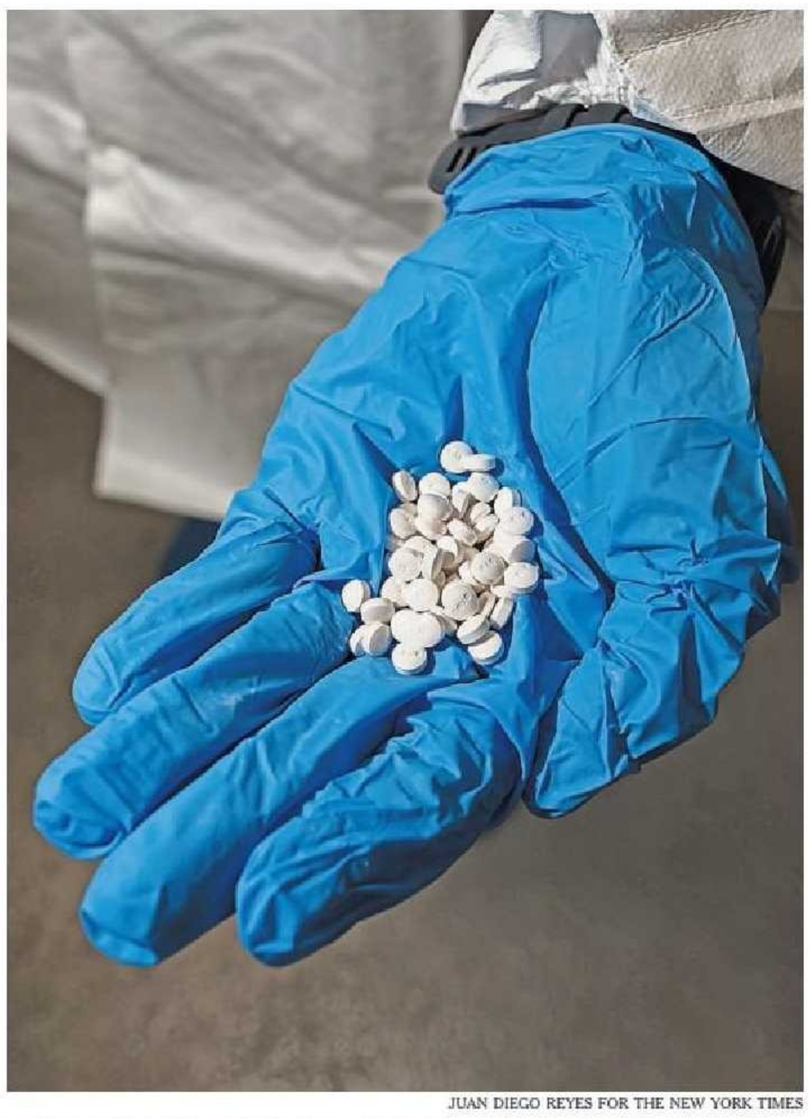

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Investors are cognizant that the key patent on semaglutide, Wegovy's active ingredient, will expire early in the next decade, which has hurt Novo's stock.

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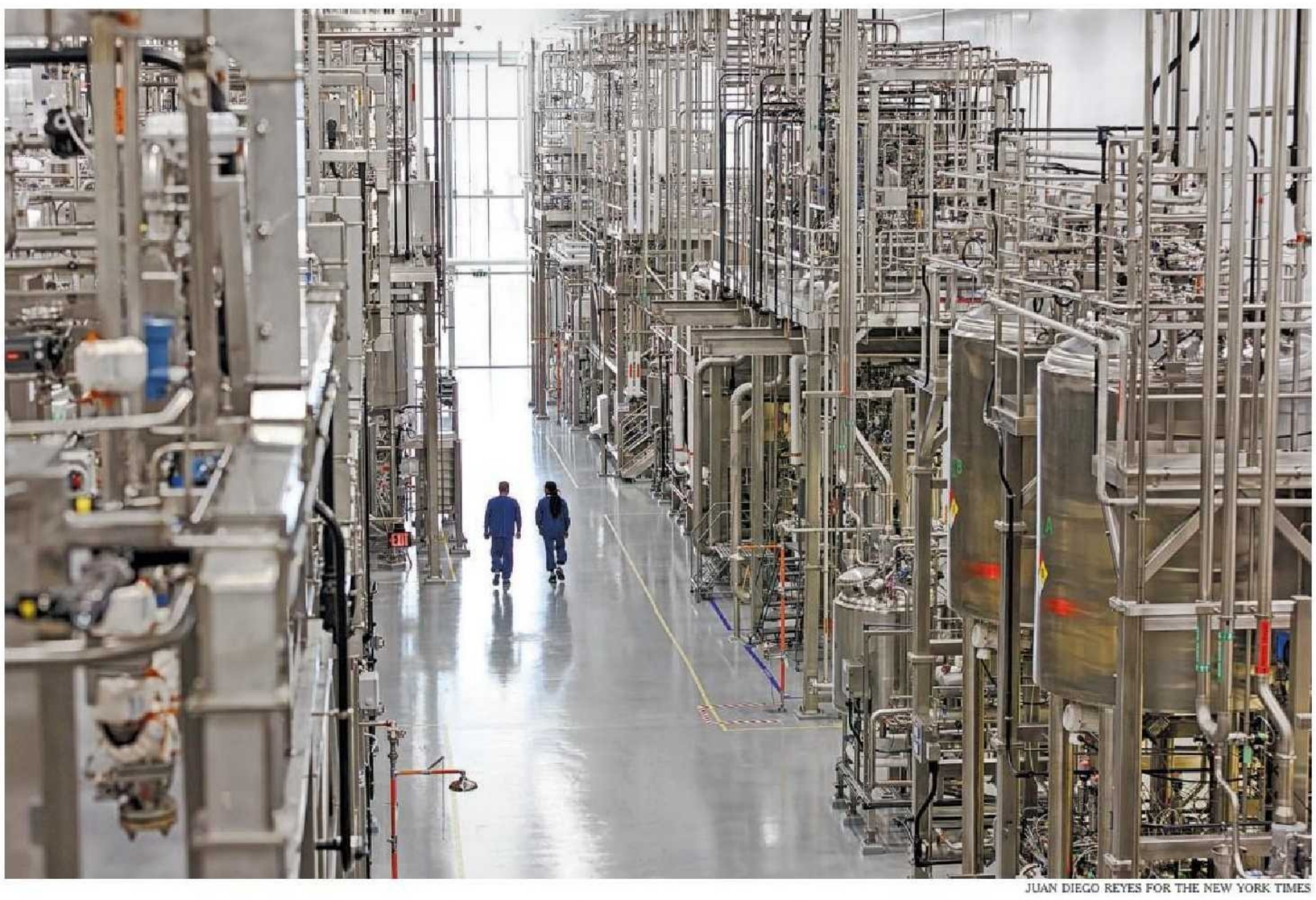
Workers at the facility in Clayton, left, and at the packaging site in Durham, N.C., right, last month. A $4 billion expansion in Clayton is underway.



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Mr. Doustdar says he focuses on serving customers, not just treating patients, adding that the drugs are for anyone with a prescription, without judgment.

Mr. Doustdar emphasized the company's American ties when he was negotiating last year with President Trump, who was threatening to impose tariffs on imported medicines. The company is plowing ahead with a $4 billion expansion in Clayton, N.C., next to a production facility it opened 30 years ago.

For American consumers, Novo Nordisk makes the Wegovy pill from start to finish in North Carolina, across two locations in Clayton and Durham, which are about an hour's drive apart.

Buying Time

Are any of these changes enough to convince investors that Novo's future is not as grim as its share price suggests?

Companies can reverse their ill fortunes. But the successes, like those of Microsoft and Best Buy, are few and far between.

"You're more likely to get a Nokia than a Microsoft," said Randall Peterson, a professor at the London Business School, referring to the Finnish company that lost an early lead in the cellphone business.

Hassan Chowdhry, a portfolio manager at GMO Asset Management, said he had divested from Novo Nordisk this year. The trigger was the disappointing trial results of CagriSema, Novo's next-generation weight-loss drug, which is expected to be available early next year, subject to U.S. approval. In February, Novo failed to prove it was more efficacious at weight loss than an existing Eli Lilly drug it would compete with.

While Mr. Chowdhry expects weight loss to be a $150 billion market with plenty of room for two big players, he said that Novo had a long way to go before it could release a really competitive product. For example, another drug, Zenagamtide, is likely years away from coming to market.

"There doesn't seem to be any catalyst in the immediate term that might push the stock up in a major way," Mr. Chowdhry said.

Some analysts and Novo shareholders want the company to diversify, possibly through acquisitions. Nearly 95 percent of its sales came from diabetes and obesity medicines in the first half of 2026. Eli Lilly, by comparison, has growing investments in neuroscience and immunology.

Among those vocal investors is Markus Manns, a portfolio manager at Union Investment in Frankfurt, who owns shares in both companies. Novo Nordisk, he said, is "still lacking a vision for sustainable growth," though he is hopeful it will detail one at an investor meeting this month.

The constant comparisons with Lilly frustrate Mr. Doustdar. For investors, the rivalry has become like an "obsession," he said.

But the comparisons with Lilly will be hard to shake, especially because the company is expected to seek U.S. approval for its next-generation drug, retatrutide, early next year.

So what will change the sentiment about Novo Nordisk? "Time," Mr. Doustdar said.

CagriSema promises to be a test case. Though investors aren't enthusiastic about it, the drug will be available relatively soon.

"It's a much better drug than right now investors are writing in their models," Mr. Doustdar said. "But like I said, I don't need to sell this to investors. I need to sell these to physicians who understand the biology better."