



**George Heidgerken,  
President and COO  
Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica**

St. Joseph, Missouri  
<http://bi-vetmedica.com>

Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, the animal health arm of pharma giant Boehringer Ingelheim, has been operating out of St. Joseph, Missouri for nearly half of the company's 55-year history. As the northernmost anchor of the "animal health corridor," Boehringer is one of more than 200 regional companies devoted to animal health – the highest concentration of the industry in the world. President and COO, George Heidgerken, talks about the significance of animal health in the area.

"Companies started here because of hog cholera. The vaccines had to be developed close to where the animals were...in the large stockyards. So it was logical that the industry grew up here.

"When I got here in 1997, I took a look at what we already had — centers of excellence for research and operations and a world-class workforce — and started to build on it. The "animal health corridor" got started some time later, and its aims were to encourage more businesses to come to Missouri and to help local universities and high schools build up a pool of competent graduates.

"We were asking ourselves then...Where do we want to be 10 years from now? What would be most valuable to industries and businesses already in the area? We knew we had to upgrade science in the high schools and work more closely with the colleges to build our vision.

"The competition here is great. It's an engine for building a strong work force and for providing nearby schools with direction. The more competition you have, the more partners you have coming into the corridor. The more partners you have, the more capacity and infrastructure you have to support them. Ultimately, competition gives us even closer access to the workforce.

"We like to partner whenever we can with biotech centers that have intellectual property lawyers, chemists and formulation scientists. We've got a good start through Stowers (in nearby Kansas City) and Washington University in St. Louis. Those relationships are very positive, and they fuel more interest in what we're doing.

"We also work closely with schools. We built our own Masters program in collaboration with Northwest Missouri State University, to include vital elements of what we needed in our business. We're also sponsoring PhDs through the University of Missouri-Columbia. When we need animal studies, MU does them for us.

"About 60% of Boehringer's total research dollars are spent in the United States. Here in St. Joseph, we have 350 people working in R & D, so those university partnerships are essential."

Heidgerken talks about moving to Northwest Missouri from his native Saskatchewan in the late nineties.

"Saskatchewan is the Midwest of Canada. It's about as Midwest as it comes. I grew up in an agricultural community and graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with an ag degree. I essentially grew up in the industry.

"So for me, coming to St. Joseph was like coming back to my roots. People here have the same values, the same economy, the same educational ambition I was used to, so it was simple for me and my family to make the move. And it's a fun place to be. Very warm. Very accepting. It's easy to come here when people want to get to know you. When I came to Missouri, it was like I was coming home.

"Missouri is a secret we don't want kept. As word gets out that you can be gainfully employed here and you can use your creativity and you can find a great place for your family, our industry will become stronger and stronger."