Merck Animal Health (known as MSD Animal Health outside the U.S.A. and Canada) is the animal health division of Merck & Co of Whitehouse Station NJ, USA. The business unit achieved sales in 2011 of approximately US$ 3.3 billion and is the world’s second-largest animal health company.

Merck Animal Health has a rich history; it is a story of innovation, commitment to research and entrepreneurship in animal health, reaching back to over 70 years. The establishment of the company was sparked by breakthrough ideas – ideas from people with the intelligence and spirit to take on the diseases they saw harming animals, people and livelihoods around them. Now this long-standing experience is helping to shape the future of animal health.

Activities in the animal health sector at Merck have been traced back to the early 1940s with the development by Max Tischler (at that time Head of Research at Merck) of sulfaquinoxaline, the first coccidiostatic for use in poultry. The company’s reputation in animal health became strongly established after the publication of the first edition of the soon to be famous Merck Veterinary Manual in 1955. In 1979 Merck AgVet was created as a separate animal health division of Merck. After the isolation and modification of innovative macrolytic lactones by Merck scientists in the 1970s, the new antiparasitic compound ivermectin was developed and marketed as MECTIZAN in 1980. It became soon one of the most successful veterinary drugs ever and also found widespread use in humans as a treatment against a tropical disease named ‘river blindness’. In 1997 Merck AgVet was combined with the animal health division of the French pharmaceutical company Rhone Merieux (later Sanofi) in an equally-owned joint venture named Merial. In order to enable the acquisition of Schering-Plough (and its animal health division Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health) in 2009, Merck divested its 50 percent share in Merial to Sanofi. As a result of this merger, Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health became the animal health division of Merck, the world’s second largest pharmaceutical company. The company changed its name to Merck Animal Health in 2011.

The origins of Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health are rooted in veterinary research reaching back over 60 years. Lateral thinking by a Netherlands-based animal feed manufacturer led to developing vaccines to combat poultry diseases. Another important root was to leverage human medicine into animal health which took off in the USA. In 2007, both roots were brought together in Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health when Schering-Plough acquired Organon BioSciences (of which Intervet was the animal health division) from AkzoNobel.

The historical symmetries of the two companies suggest symbiosis - with respect to product lines, innovation, entrepreneurship and customer service as well as track records in positively assimilating talent and resources. The sum of the knowledge was greater than the individual parts, providing the foundation to become a world leader in animal health.
Intervet began life in 1949 in Boxmeer (The Netherlands), where the animal health unit headquarters remains today. Laboratoria Nobilis, founded by animal feed manufacturer Wim Hendrix, was researching poultry vaccines. Hendrix observed that “sick chickens don’t eat” – hardly ideal for feed sales. Vaccinated, healthy birds would be better for business. Addressing his primary concern of Fowl Pox, Professor Jac Jansen of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Utrecht University agreed to help, suggesting he employ one of his assistants, J.H.M. Richter. Richter developed the first inoculum for Fowl Pox in 1950, OVO DIPHTERIN, quickly followed by other vaccines and laying the foundations for future growth. By 1961, Nobilis was exporting significant amounts of veterinary vaccines, its growth attracting a takeover by Netherlands-based pharmaceutical manufacturer Koninklijke Zwanenberg Organon (which later became AkzoNobel). Further acquisitions broadened the company’s scope beyond vaccines, and also brought the name Intervet, (although the group did not formally adopt this name until 1969). Nevertheless, the name ‘NOBILIS’ still remains as an umbrella brand name for a range of poultry vaccines.

Intervet already had a strong European presence. Looking for global reach, the company bought Inter-Continental Biologicals, which became the U.S. subsidiary Intervet Inc. With a Marek’s Disease vaccine as the first U.S. product, Intervet was going on to market 17 vaccines in a single year, firmly establishing the company in the U.S. In addition to vaccines, over the years Intervet also built a strong position in products for reproduction management in farm animals. Intervet grew to become Europe’s largest animal health company and in the 1990s they became the 3rd largest in the world, acquiring companies such as Norbio (aquatic animal vaccines), Hoechst Roussel Vet (antiparasitics and anti-infectives) and Bayer’s U.S. veterinary vaccine operations.

Innovation flowed through products including broad-spectrum anthelmintic PANACUR, the COBACTAN range of anti-infectives, and SCALIBOR, a dog-collar to prevent Leishmaniasis from sandfly bites. Intervet also introduced in 1982 the first-ever recombinant vaccine – for E. coli infection in swine – followed by the first-ever live marker vaccine against Aujeszky’s disease and a sub-unit marker vaccine against classical swine fever.
In the U.S., Schering-Plough Animal Health was taking root in the 1950s. The parent company Schering had existed since the 1860s; their veterinary division was formally established in 1955 in Bloomfield NJ, U.S.A. It was designed to service a demand for the corticosteroid prednisone – originally a human medicine – to treat ketosis in dairy cattle. From an initial sales team of three, it increased tenfold in two years, entering the vaccine market in 1959 by acquiring American Scientific Laboratories. Schering merged with Plough, Inc., in 1971, becoming the Schering-Plough Corporation. Schering-Plough’s animal health acquisitions also continued, purchasing vaccine makers Douglas Industries in 1981, and French company Rigaux in 1982, which provided European manufacturing facilities and a range of European-oriented products. The European presence was further augmented by the acquisition of Byk Gulden in Germany.

Meanwhile, Schering-Plough Animal Health built stakes in key markets, via new products, including the injectable bovine antibiotic NUFLOR, the equine anti-inflammatory drug BANAMINE, the antiparasitic drug SLICE for salmon and OTOMAX canine eardrops. Via acquisition - Fisons, Fujisawa and Mallinckrodt - and joint venture - including Takeda, Japan’s largest animal health company, the company continued to expand. In 2005, they took control of Takeda’s entire Japanese animal health operations.