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Erik Present outlines Healixia's progress in the past three years as the association which brings together medical professionals from across the Belgian healthcare and life sciences ecosystem has grown. Present also touches on how Healiaxia works to break down organisational silos and create opportunities for its members, and highlights some of the key trends at play in the Belgian healthcare ecosystem today.



Last time we spoke in early 2020, you gave us an introduction to what was then a new organisation – Healixia, the Belgian community of professionals across medicines, medical devices, in vitro diagnostics & other health-related products. How has Healixia

progressed since then?

Belgium has a very strong and active ecosystem in health and healthcare; from hospitals and universities to knowledge centres and small and larger companies. Healixia focuses on the professionals across this ecosystem and tries to bring them together in a community and offer educational and networking activities. This means that our professional members are at the centre of everything we do. With more than 700 members coming from across the entire life sciences spectrum, from industry to academia and consultancy, Healixia is the largest of such organisations in Belgium. Healixia remains a not-for-profit organisation and all involved do this voluntarily and non-paid: this way we can ensure the members' contribution is fully used to serve their needs.

Healixia is predominantly engaged in educational activities such as symposia and webinars as well as creating networking opportunities. We aim to act as a bridge between different actors in the Belgian landscape (e.g., industry, academia and authorities etc) and between different functions along the lifecycle of a drug or device.

Our member base and board primarily consist of professionals working in those same four groups: medical affairs (medical science liaisons, medical advisors and other medical affairs professionals); regulatory affairs and quality (including pharmacovigilance); clinical trials (such as trial monitors and principal investigators); and early development (Phase One units). Belgium has an excellent clinical trial footprint and scores high in the European ranking in terms of the number of clinical trials and has nine Phase One Clinical trials units (seven academic and two commercial). We are now exploring the possibility of expanding beyond these four groups to include professionals working in market access as well as legal, ethics and compliance. If there is enough traction, we may look to create a fifth domain for our organisation. Healixia will continue to conduct domain-focused activities but we also set up overarching activities bringing professionals together from different functions and players within our ecosystem.

What value do your members gain from being part of Healixia?

We aim to be a one-stop-shop for educational activities and symposia that help professionals further develop and become better at their jobs, but also bring in a broader and forward-looking perspective and break down silos between actors and functions. This is a key point as many of Healixia's activities involve professionals with different functions and from different parts of organisations or different actors. In the complex era in which we now live, breaking down silos is crucial. Proximity creates opportunity; only when people know and trust each other can a strong

collaboration start. There are many activities where different functions come together, e.g. setting up an early access programme providing a drug for patients with unmet need would require close collaboration between authorities and companies; and within a company, multiple functions are involved: regulatory affairs, medical affairs, legal and also clinical if there is a data generating component.

Does Healixia have any equivalents in other countries or is it a particularly Belgian model?

When forming Healixia we took a lot of lessons from a similar organisation in the Netherlands, although we have since grown to become a larger grouping.

One area where Healixia is particularly active, which is specific to Belgium, is supporting the recognition of pharmaceutical medicine or clinical pharmacology as a speciality for physicians. Belgian physicians that want to actively engage with the pharma industry or in clinical development currently lack a clear educational track, Healixia is attempting to bring the right stakeholders together on this topic. Estimations show that around 400 to 450 Belgian physicians are active in companies, academia, or authorities around the life cycle of a drug or device.

Additionally, for young starters, it is sometimes difficult to navigate our landscape and find a starting role that fits with competencies and ambitions: also, here we try to support and bring young starters together with more seasoned professionals and support a kind of “mentoring”.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online working led to a huge increase in webinars and subsequent fatigue among professionals. How do you ensure that Healixia’s offering is relevant, engaging, and motivating for its members?

We work with educational groups to establish programmes where both the topic and the speaker are highly relevant for our audience. Moreover, our offering which mixes webinars and face-to-face events has been embraced by our members. It can be quite straightforward to log on and attend a webinar after a normal working day, while there is also still demand for in-person networking events whereby our members can meet professionals from other organisations, such as our New Year’s drinks and summer barbecue.

What are the educational niches in which your members are most in need of developing?

Many industry professionals, even those with a long track record, are not familiar with job functions in different parts of their organisation. For this reason, we launched the ‘Fundamentals’ educational programme where people present their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, with the increased complexity and professionalisation of roles in medical, regulatory affairs and development companies do not necessarily have the capabilities in-house to offer adequate training. This is especially true for smaller organisations. Therefore, Healixia has established full-day programs around the fundamentals of these jobs, how people can be successful within them, and the ways in which maximum value can be extracted. We see an issue of people, especially at the beginning of their career, not seeing the forest for the trees – focusing too much on their own role and not seeing how it fits into the broader picture. Our aim is to help provide this picture and by doing so break down silos.

We have large events, with over 100 participants, like our yearly symposium in spring and our clinical conference during fall but also smaller activities targeted to a niche group (e.g. to pharmacovigilance professionals). This way we aim to provide a broad variety of activities that serves the diversity of our members.

What do you see as some of the most important trends at play in the Belgian healthcare ecosystem today?

The field of research has evolved, and data has become central. The creation of a Health Data Agency has the potential to be a real game changer, providing more access to anonymised patient data for all parties, including industry and better connecting what has traditionally been quite a siloed healthcare system.

On clinical trials, pharma.be has produced a plan summarising the actions that need to be taken to ensure that Belgium retains its positioning as a good investment destination. It is all about bringing individual clinical trial sites together into clinical trial centres which, as research moves into more niche and rare indications, will broaden the catchment area and boost patient recruitment potential.

In terms of market access, the gap between EMA approval and reimbursement in Belgian needs to shorten if we are to stay relevant as an R&D hub. As an industry, we must ensure that the products

that we develop are accessible for Belgian patients. The NIHDI has proposed an update to the reimbursement procedures, and pharma.be represents the industry's voice to them. As Healixia we have more of a signal function, whereby if our members notice something that needs adapting or changing, we highlight it to pharma.be or other relevant actors; but we are not a lobby organisation

What are your expectations for the Healixia annual conference at the end of April 2023?

This will be a very forward-looking symposium featuring excellent speakers from different parts of the ecosystem. Topics covered will include the microbiome, CAR-T, and vaccine development, as well as how pharma interacts with medical devices and nanotechnology. The symposium has an overarching audience of our entire membership base, who we aim to inspire, and we will also present our annual award to those who have made a significant contribution to the ecosystem in Belgium.

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