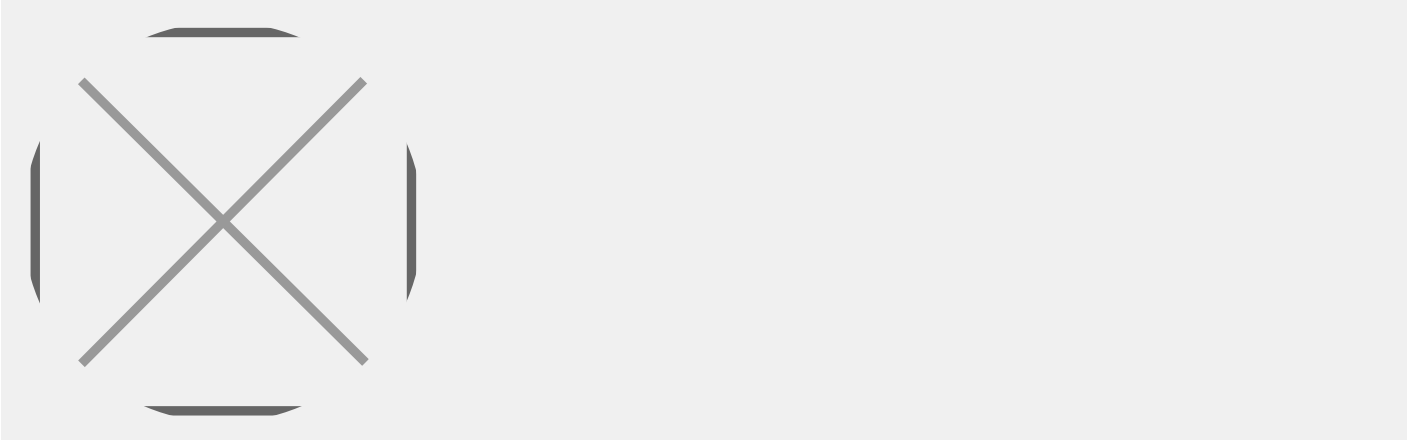
Interview with Janneke van der Kamp, Country President, Novartis Belgium



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janneke-van-der-kamp-country-president.jpg

Is your career path, you launched your career as a strategy consultant however, since then you have moved into the pharmaceutical industry by joining Novartis where you quickly worked your way up the ladder. What attracted you to this industry and Novartis specifically?

Prior to beginning my career as a consultant, I earned my degree in chemistry which explains why I joined the pharmaceutical industry. Following my studies, I enjoyed transitioning from a scientific field into the strategy consulting profession because I felt like focusing on science would be too narrow for me. Moreover, I believe that launching a career in strategy consulting was a great first step as it was an ideal learning experience being exposed to so many different companies and industries while having the opportunity to be brought out to an executive level at a young age which is uncommon for people at the beginning of their career.

Following three and a half enjoyable years in strategy consulting, I went on to pursue an MBA at INSEAD from which I wanted to achieve two things. Firstly, since I am strongly result oriented, I wanted to position myself in an environment which was closer to execution and results. Secondly, having been distanced from the field of chemistry, I wanted to return to the scientific and medical disciplines. After all, the reason I had pursued chemistry was because I had always been fascinated by the inner functions of the human body and I think it is the most beautiful machine there is. Therefore, following my MBA, I began seeking placement within the biotech or pharma field so that I could, once again, be involved in and contribute to that beautiful machine.

Given that I was still new to the industry, I opted to target pharma companies instead of biotech since I figured I would learn more in a large pharmaceutical company. Among the sea of pharma companies, I was drawn to Novartis because its CSR activities appealed to me as did its strong performance and solid product pipeline. Perhaps most importantly, however, I was invited to enrol in Novartis' renowned talent management program that enabled me to gain extensive experience into the company's various operations. In summary, these are the features, which drew me to become part of the Novartis team where I continue to enjoy experiences and exposure to a great deal of opportunities.

The healthcare sector in developed markets is facing dramatic challenges of rapidly ageing populations, insufficient public financing and more cost cuts – whilst experiencing a skills shortage. How have these challenges affected the Belgian affiliates operations and strategy and what opportunities do you see here?

Novartis is one of the world's most successful pharmaceutical companies while Novartis Pharma in Belgium is the fastest and only growing company, along with MSD, and a top 5 company. In fact, Novartis Pharma is on track to climb from fifth ranking in the Belgian market to the third in terms of sales by next year. Therefore, I cannot say that we have experienced any significant and direct adverse consequences stemming from these developments.

Moreover, looking at the Novartis group in Belgium as a whole, I would say that we are better positioned compared to other companies owing to the diversity of our operations. Naturally, the variety of our divisions increases our leveraging power with respect to communicating with the government since we are active in a range of segments in the pharmaceutical industry. Of course, we understand the government's motives for decreasing their expenditures however, at the same time it also needs to provide society with access to innovative medicines. Hence, as a pharmaceutical company with both innovative and generic portfolios, we are well equipped to have these discussions with the government as a real partner.

Novartis has been one of the main protagonists among 'big pharma' in trying to overcome the blockbuster model and expand its product portfolio through both M&A in different niches as well as heavy R&D investments for the expansion of the product pipeline. To what extent is the Belgian affiliate leveraging the country's leadership in R&D and Clinical Trials?

Indeed, Belgium is a great market for R&D and we are certainly capitalizing on this by rather successfully attracting as many trials from our headquarters as possible. In addition to this, we also invest about €12 million in R&D in Belgium and are also leading investors in local clinical research with 100 on-going trials across 400 centres involving 1,500 patients. Of course, another strength of the Belgian clinical research industry is that it hosts an excellent environment for early stage clinical trials, which is something that is increasingly difficult to outsource. Incidentally, it is therefore quite

often the case that Belgium is the first country to commence with clinical studies. This is most likely due to the fact that the system here allows for quick and efficient study approvals. These trials encompass all the therapeutics areas we are active in and range from phase-I to phase-IV.

Overall, we are certainly leveraging the positive R&D climate that Belgium offers to the fullest so that our key opinion leaders get involved with the molecules as early as possible.

Novartis Pharma is the largest division of the group in Belgium and has posted impressive growth figures in the recent past. What have been your main growth drivers in the Belgian market?

Clearly, Novartis has for the past few years been undergoing a transformation with the rejuvenation of its portfolio, successful launches and a strong pipeline, which will allow our company to offset the loss of one of our blockbusters, Diovan. Furthermore, the diversity of Novartis' products and addressed therapeutic areas is undoubtedly an advantage for the company as it helps to balance its potential risks. On the other hand however, this diversity can also be viewed as a challenge since we have to compete with specialized drug companies that are only focused on specific therapeutic areas. For instance, as we are active in multiple sclerosis (MS) and diabetes, we have to be able to compete directly with companies that are dedicated exclusively to those fields.

In terms of products that have contributed the most to our sales over the last few years, Lucentis has been a great performer. Another product that we have recently launched is Gilenya. Besides being highly effective, this drug is also very convenient since patients no longer need to inject themselves to treat their illness. Despite its recent release, this product has taken off quite rapidly and we expect it to perform very well in the future. In addition to this, our Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) portfolio is also very strong as is our oncology portfolio. It is therefore clear that our success is not rooted in a small number of specific products but rather in a broad range of many products, demonstrating the strength of having a diversified portfolio and a strong product pipeline with at least one launch every year.

It is clear that Novartis goes to great lengths to provide patients with treatments so that they can lead better lives. Beyond that, can you describe some of the public initiatives that Novartis is pursuing to improve people's lives?

Referring back to our recently launched treatment for MS, we feel that our duty as a company is not only to provide patients with the drugs but to also take care of the patients in a broader sense. For example, one of the concerns we've observed that MS patients face relates to the negative labelling that they are subject to. In response, we have set up a Facebook campaign together with the patients association and a popular chain of shoe stores named 'change your mind, change your shoes'. The goal of this campaign is to change the perceived negative image of MS.

Another initiative we are sponsoring is the ‘Climbing for Life’ project. This involves a number of asthma and cystic fibrosis (CF) patients climbing to the summit of the Col du Galibier in France. This is another example of collaborations we are involved in along with government bodies and a number of patient associations.

Your counterpart Mr Patrice Zagame in France told us that Novartis has been one of the pioneers on Biotech development and manufacturing in France, being one of the first companies to set up an advanced biotech manufacturing facility there. Given Belgium’s strong presence in the Biotech industry, how has Novartis leveraged on this strength in order to strengthen its position in the Biotech arena?

Indeed Belgium has a strong presence in Biotech, and Novartis (Alcon) recently partnered with Thrombogenics for the European commercialisation of Ocriplasmin, a new treatment in ophthalmology.

Also, next to the commercial organization in Belgium, we have a large and technically advanced production facility for Alcon in Puurs where we produce highly sophisticated pharmaceuticals, surgicals and vision care products.

Clearly, the pharmaceutical industry has a strong presence here in Belgium but now that Novartis has merged with Alcon, it has furthered its leveraging power since it now has, alongside its commercial operations, manufacturing activities as well that employ a large number of highly skilled people.

In your opinion, what attributes does Belgium have in terms of being an attractive investment destination for the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry and what can be done to increase its attractiveness?

As mentioned, some of Belgium’s advantages include its strength in R&D as well as the fact that pharmaceuticals is viewed as a partner by the government because of the large numbers of highly skilled people it employs. The pharma and biotech industry is indeed a key pillar in the Belgian economy and its reputation for innovation.

On the other hand, the price levels in Belgium, which are at the low end of the European range, constitute some of the drawbacks in the market. In addition to this, reimbursement timelines are also rather lengthy in Belgium, taking at least nine months from Competent Health Authorities approval to reimbursement on the Belgian market. Needless to say, this is detrimental to the patients’ well-being and the overall business environment. Of course, we can understand the government’s decisions for cost containment measures, however at a certain point this could drive investments and products away from the Belgian market.

In summary, I would say that structurally, from an R&D perspective, Belgium is very attractive, however, operationally it is challenging.

Where would you like to take Novartis' Belgian operations in the next 2-3 years?

Referring back to what I mentioned earlier, we are one of the few companies that are still experiencing growth and moving into a new position in the Belgian market. That is with the pharma division climbing from the 5th position to the 3rd, while as a group, we are already second overall in terms of sales. With that, there also comes the responsibility to assume a leadership position in the country. That is clearly something that my predecessor has already started and something I intend to continue.

On the other hand, I want to address our internal challenge of performing as well as, or even better, than the dedicated drug companies we are competing with. This entails developing the flexibility and agility of a company focused on one or two disease areas in each therapeutic area that we compete in. In other words, it involves combining the breadth that evidently makes us a strong player with the flexibility of specialized competitors. To that end, we are now organized into business franchises which best allows us to meet the needs of our customers and patients.

Going beyond the business and strategic topics, as a pharmaceutical giant with a global reach, Novartis is in an ideal position to reach out through CSR activities. Could you provide us with an outline of such initiatives headed by Novartis in Belgium?

Our corporate social responsibility rests on 3 pillars: access to healthcare, partnerships and ethical business conduct.

Within that, one of our biggest areas of success recently involves giving a voice to the patient groups. That is, one of the pillars of our CSR policy is to provide broad access to a maximum of patients. Giving their representatives a voice is definitely something we are proud of. We also make the most of our community partnership day. This global initiative is implemented every year where all employees of the country division are invited to volunteer for one day and provide support for our programs. For instance, this year we complemented the 'change your mind, change your shoes' campaign with activities during which all the employees went to the National MS Center and helped drive the notion of moving and changing for the patients. Another example is the campaign we took part in last year to raise awareness of a rare disease among the African population in Brussels by means of a leafleting campaign.

Overall, there are many initiatives we put in place to give patient groups a voice, especially with respect to rare diseases. As we move along towards targeted therapies, we attend to an increasingly specific patient population where there are many people that are unfortunately represented by very small groups. This is surely one area in which we intend to help and I believe that we are doing so quite successfully. One of the ways we feel we are really helping patient

advocacy groups is through capacity-building schemes. Many patient groups are represented by volunteers who long to develop more professional skills. The ultimate goal here is to equip them to be able to better tackle the challenges they face in a more successful manner for the patients they represent.

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