Interview: Wiebke Rieb – General Manager, Pfizer, The Netherlands

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Wiebke Rieb describes Pfizer's commitment to ensuring patient access to the necessary treatments and working with all stakeholders to further strengthen the Dutch healthcare system, as well as the company's community projects.

Ms. Rieb, you became head of the Dutch affiliate in April 2014. What have been your main strategic priorities since taking on the direction of Pfizer Netherlands?

The Netherlands healthcare environment has changed quite a lot over the last couple of years, becoming more and more complex. In the past, Pfizer relied on much face-to-face promotion of our products. However, since the transfer of many medicines to the hospital budget in 2012, the market has become much more complicated for all stakeholders, Pfizer included. Our main focus has thus been to act as a partner in this complex environment and work with the necessary stakeholders to make sure patients receive access to our innovative medicines. Thus far during my tenure, Pfizer in the Netherlands has made quite good progress both in ensuring patient access, as well as in building partnerships locally.

It is fair to say that the Netherlands is seen by its peers as one of the most challenging EU markets in terms of accessing the patient and pricing. What is your assessment of the Dutch market?

We often forget the Netherlands has one of the best healthcare systems in Europe. We should do everything we can to maintain the quality of this system for healthcare consumers and to work together for improvements. Bearing this in mind, one of the main challenges in the Netherlands is the complexity of the system, given a plethora of decision makers and a high level of regionalization. Many Pfizer affiliates are located in geographies with a strongly centralized healthcare system, while the Netherlands boasts a high degree of regionalization, experiments in healthcare, and stakeholders working together in groups. Therefore, the market is in many ways dependent on regional settings and a multiplicity of stakeholders working together. If you look for example at patient pathways in thrombosis care, organizations vary greatly in different areas of the country. A company like Pfizer thus has to be very flexible and adaptive in this market.

What is the strategic importance of the Netherlands affiliate in Pfizer's European portfolio?

In many therapeutic areas, the Netherlands stands at number six for Pfizer, right behind the European big five. This affiliate also has an important role, given the progress made in our working together with stakeholders in contracting. For example, with the shift of many products to the hospital budget, we have to engage in new ways with stakeholders to make sure patients have access. This is quite something on the forefront in the Netherlands, as compared to other markets. The local market complexity gives many opportunities to work in that sense, and the lessons learned can later be applied in other geographies.

Pfizer Netherlands is split between three business lines: Global Innovative Pharma Business (GIP), Established Global Pharma Business (GEP), Global Vaccines, Oncology and Consumer Healthcare Business (VOC). Which Business Unit is currently the main growth driver in the Netherlands?

The majority of growth is still coming from the Global Innovative Pharma Business. Over the past 18 months, we have launched several exciting oncology products that are a major contribution to the Dutch healthcare system. Pfizer also has a strong inflammation focus in the pipeline, which will be reflected in products launched in the Netherlands in the coming years. Several more oncology products are also upcoming.

At the same time, the Established Global Pharma Business part will be boosted with the recent acquisition of Hospira, given their portfolio of generic sterile injectables and biosimilars. As of now, Hospira and Pfizer are still two separate companies in the Netherlands, but the integration of the two companies is upcoming locally.

Pfizer ranks today as the number two in the world in sales among all pharma companies, and in 2010 Rob van Aperen told us that Pfizer was number one in the Netherlands. What is your position locally today?

We are number one locally and are working hard on sustainable growth. To maintain our position, we very much focus on company culture. Our global ‘OWNIT!’ culture gives a lot of accountability to our employees, encouraging them to take thoughtful risks and making sure they are present and hear and see everything in the market to best adapt to the local context. Pfizer’s culture of accountability paired with the freedom to be accountable means that we can work together with our stakeholders to make innovation happen. Furthermore, our cross-functional teams bring people from different parts of the company together to avoid thinking in one pathway, offering different perspectives and new ideas.

Pfizer recently acquired minority interest in Dutch biopharmaceutical company AM-Pharma. How does this partnering reflect Pfizer’s wider strategy?

Pfizer has looked for additions in our strategic geography to make sure we deliver innovation for our stakeholders. AM-Pharma is a good example in that Pfizer is not looking at biotech per say but rather specific additions that make the therapeutic areas in which operate stronger. Such partnering activities lead to a stronger pipeline moving forward.

What is your impression of the research culture and infrastructure in the Netherlands?

The Netherlands remains an important destination for clinical trials for our company, thanks to a strong research infrastructure. We currently conduct about 50 studies in the Netherlands on 20 different compounds, with a particular focus on inflammation and cardiovascular disease. As one example, the CAPiTA study with the pneumococcal vaccine took place here in the Netherlands and has thus contributed to improved care worldwide in this therapeutic area. Furthermore, we work with national key opinion leaders in the Netherlands, in such areas as diabetes and inflammation.

In May 2015, Pfizer Netherlands staff worked together in small teams to come out with applicable care projects / ideas that could improve the Dutch health care and health. Among the 23 projects, the three winning projects received funding to translate these projects into reality. Can you tell us more about the results of this initiative?

This initiative combines two Pfizer values – community support and the dare to try thoughtful risk-taking culture. Our staff is very talented, so we decided to put them together in groups and make their knowledge power available for community projects. It gives a lot of energy to the team and

offers interesting perspectives for the wider community.

In one specific project from this initiative, we look at how companies can support employees suffering from cancer during their time battling the disease. We first implement the findings here at our affiliate, and the program designed can then be used by other companies. It is an interesting initiative, as many people want to help fellow staff at such moments but simply do not know how. This is thus another example of how Pfizer aims to help patients not only with medication but also on a wider scale.

Can you please elaborate on the yearly healthcare congress "Caring for the Future" that you organize since 2004?

We see ourselves as part of the Dutch healthcare system and want to create the best possible access. It is not simply the added value of our medicines but also in helping to optimize the healthcare system and supporting the discussion around the healthcare system that Pfizer can make a contribution locally. I am on the Board of Nefarma, as we are interested in being a partner in this Dutch environment. As such, it is one of our beliefs that we are obliged to help the system through knowledge and fostering a dialogue between stakeholders. The "Caring for the Future" conference is simply one example of this long-term commitment. In January 2016, we will host the next conference in this series and focus on the future of the primary care system in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands will hold the Presidency of the EU in 2016 and the Ministry of Health has a clear agenda. If there were one idea that you could express to the Minister of Health across at this critical time, what would that be?

We all should aim to bring innovation to the patients and make the healthcare system sustainable over the long term.

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