Erik Present – President, Healixia, Belgium (May 2020)



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Erik Present is president of Healixia, a newly formed association for medical professionals in Belgium. Present introduces the mission and purpose of Healixia, the work it is currently undertaking in terms of development, education, training and networking opportunities, and the role of the association within Belgium's broader healthcare and life sciences innovation ecosystem.

Please begin by introducing yourself and the mission of Healixia.

I am a physician by training and currently hold the position of medical director for Galapagos in the Benelux. I am a medical affairs professional with over 20 years of experience across several companies. I have also been active in several professional associations for many years which led me to become the first president of the newly formed association, Healixia.

Healixia is a Belgian not-for-profit association of professionals active along the life cycle of medicines, medical devices, in-vitro diagnostics & other health-related products. Members are active in research & development, medical affairs, safety, regulatory affairs and market access in the industry, academia, investigator sites, authorities, regulatory bodies or in consultancy. We want to be a home for all medical professionals in Belgium, offering educational and networking opportunities.

We have a board of eight members, six of which are industry professionals and two are academics. Healixia is an organization which brings people together from different disciplines and involves all

relevant stakeholders in Belgium.

Healixia is the result of a convergence of four associations: ACRP.be (Belgian chapter of the Association for Clinical Research Professionals), BAPU (Belgian Association of Phase I Units), BeAPP (Belgian Association of Pharmaceutical Professionals) and BRAS (Belgian Regulatory Affairs Society) who all had a long and successful history in Belgium, and will continue as a joint new member association encompassing all these organizations.

What was the relational for merging these organizations to create Healixia?

In the past, we saw that there where many silos between academia and industry in Belgium, and even within companies the different departments worked rather independently of each other. However, we now see that there is increasing collaboration between all these activities. Moreover, career paths of professionals are evolving, and professionals take on more diverse roles throughout their careers rather than only focusing on one area of business. This goes for people moving between academia, pharma, and consultancy as well. Therefore, merging four associations to create Healixia was a strategic decision that reflects the changing dynamics of the modern healthcare and life science ecosystem.

What is the top priority on the activity agenda of Healixia and its members?

Healixia provides development, education, training and networking opportunities across all members and disciplines. Healixia aims to further professionalize its members and concerned disciplines and is open to working with all relevant stakeholders towards a strong community of professionals in Belgium.

We are advocates of pharmaceutical medicines and clinical pharmacology: jointly we submitted a proposal for recognition of pharmaceutical medicine/clinical pharmacology as a new specialization in Belgium. Similar to other professions, we want to further professionalize pharmaceutical medicines/clinical pharmacology, starting with its own academic curriculum. This is important as Belgium is a strong pharma and biotech country and if we want to keep this position, we must invest in having well-trained professionals in all aspects of the life cycle of a drug, including the use in real-life settings.

Education and professionalism starts with an excellent academic curriculum, but life-long learning is important. Therefore Healixia offers educational sessions and training. Healixia now has around 500 members and provides also unique networking opportunities.

How would you assess the current level of collaboration between the Belgian academic and industry stakeholders?

Already I see much more collaboration between all partners. There seems to be a mutual understanding among stakeholders that if we work in silos it will be impossible to face the challenges that the future of healthcare holds. Belgium has a strong ecosystem with biotechs, Big Pharma, SMEs, top-notch universities, and high-quality hospitals. With all these factors plus a government that stimulates cooperation in terms of public-private financing, this harmonization comes quite naturally.

What are the country's key strengths when it comes to attracting clinical trials?

Belgium's legal framework is rather beneficial for the company's attractiveness for clinical trials and is quite harmonized at a European level especially with the recent implementation of the new EU regulations. For country-specific trials, particularly Phase I trials, Belgium's fast-track approval by ethical committees, and competent authorities are an important factor for these early-stage trials. Furthermore, our strong universities and hospitals are a major asset as clinical trials become more complex with the rise of innovations like personalized medicines. With the development of clinical trial centres, we are seeing a professionalization at the investigator's site in addition to improving the consistency of quality and patient recruitment. With more new drugs being personalized medicines there is a greater need for trial sites that are able to provide trained investigators and offer more comprehensive patient pools for recruiting the right participants. Also, digital tools can help to identify within patient records the right patients for the more complex trials.

How does healthcare and patient data fit into the future of innovation for Belgium?

Data science will play an increasingly important role as patient records will help hospitals find appropriate participants more efficiently. Continuing to embrace these technologies will be crucial

to maintain Belgium’s competitiveness in the future.

While Belgium is rich in health data it is currently very fragmented as healthcare institutions are not all using the same IT systems. Creating more synergies among hospitals will be very important in the future for unlocking the potential of big data. Belgium can become a front runner in this area rather than lagging behind our European counterparts.

As Healixia’s first president what is your long-term vision for the association?

This is the first year that Healixia exists as a joint association so we will continue to focus on the consolidation of the previous four organizations. Although we started with four organizations, we believe this is not an endpoint. Therefore, we created a framework that will allow for other organizations to join Healixia because silo thinking is a thing of the past.

Furthermore, we will further professionalize Healixia. Currently, only volunteers are active in Healixia. In the future, we would like to appoint a director who can drive our agenda. With 500 members we are currently the largest life science professional association in Belgium, so we also hope to enlarge our footprint, and further address the needs of our members.

How do you hope to see Belgium’s life science environment evolving in the future?

As an eco-system in Belgium that enables professionals to have a successful career. It starts by pharmaceutical medicine/clinical pharmacology represented in the curricula of the universities, to continuous education and training of professionals during the course of their career.

As careers are more flexible, and people might shift in different directions from academia to industry, from employee to consultant, and over the different functions and roles around the life cycle of compounds: from preclinical, early clinical, clinical, regulatory, medical affairs, etc – and vice versa. This means a broad and flexible offer of training, education and networking that will enrich Belgium professionals during the course of their career. Healixia wants to be a partner here for all professionals in Belgium and is open for collaboration with all relevant parties.

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