Ana Álvarez – General Director, Spain & Global Epilepsy Franchise Director, Bial



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01.03.2022

Tags: Spain, Bial, CNS, Epilepsy, Mental Health, Strategy

Bial's general manager for Spain and global director of its epilepsy franchise, Ana Álvarez, highlights the importance of the country for the organization – representing 25 percent of overall sales –, explains how she is managing the lifecycle of Bial's CNS and cardiovascular portfolio, the importance of sustainability, and the company's global strategic priorities.

Prior to joining Bial, you spent over a decade with Merck (MSD) in different positions. Can you explain your journey in the pharma industry and what led you to Bial?

I started my career as a representative for Merck, Sharp, and Dohme (MSD) in Pamplona and moved through different positions such as trainer, copywriter, product manager of brands in different stages, and managed teams of varying sizes.

After 15 years at MSD, I moved to Ashfield as a sales director. One year later, I received a call from Bial and joined the company in 2009 to become the company's commercial director in Spain.

Bial began in Spain in 1998 to explore the immunotherapy allergy sector. In 2017, Bial sold its immunotherapy business to Roxall to focus on the research and development (R&D) of new drugs for the central nervous system (CNS) and cardiovascular systems At the same time, I was named as General Manager of Bial in Spain and put in charge of the 156 employees in the country working

in the commercial operations.

What is the current focus of Bial's portfolio in Spain and how important is the affiliate for the Portuguese multinational?

The commitment to internationalization is one of the main strategic vectors of the Bial group. Bial is today an international company. In recent years we have expanded our presence throughout the world and today, besides Spain, Bial has affiliates in several European countries –Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland -, in the US and in some emergent markets. The international business currently represents around 80% of the company's turnover.

Spain is the leading affiliate of the company, it is responsible for 25 percent of Bial's income and holds 15 percent of the company's employees.

In Spain, Bial commercializes its own research medicines and other products via the establishment of license agreements with other pharmaceutical companies. The most relevant therapeutic areas in Spain are neurology, respiratory, cardiovascular and gynaecology. Neurology is the area that has more weight, including the first products of the company's own research for the treatment of epilepsy and Parkinson's Disease.

As a global leader for epilepsy, how are you leveraging the situation of the expiry of Zebinix's patent?

Bial is dedicated to providing innovative treatments for patients, working with all stakeholders to ensure patient access to all of our therapies, including Zebinix, while continuing to invest in our pipeline. We will continue to promote and invest in this medicine as it impacts the lives of so many patients suffering from epilepsy.

How do you compare market access for these products between countries?

Today, market access is complicated. Every country has its own market access limitations based on political or economic criteria. We as pharmaceutical company aim to secure patients have access to our innovative medicines and at the same time, we work to deliver the next generation treatments, in our case for CNS patients where no options are available our where their outcomes

can be improved. The national healthcare systems face many different challenges from demographics to new technology but we believe in models that reflect the value innovation deliver both for patients and societies and the contribution for the economic development of countries for more equitable and sustainable healthcare systems.

Could you tell us about the partnership with Logista Pharma in Spain during the pandemic?

The impact of the pandemic required Bial to make decisions to be in front of COVID and ensure the company’s priority of taking care of its customers, healthcare professionals, employees and patients. The company put in place its business continuity plan to reinforce stock levels to safeguard for potential supply shocks and maintain patient access to its drugs. This is crucial for certain chronic diseases such as epilepsy or Parkinson’s disease.

Logista proposed to work together for distribution. We’ve accepted the challenge as it aligns with the company’s mission to ensure everybody has access to medical treatments if they have been prescribed by a healthcare professional. Logista achieved its proposal by creating a special distribution circuit to deliver the drugs to patients who could not get out of their homes during the most critical periods of the pandemic and Bial contributed with economic support.

What is the level of stigma surrounding neurological diseases in Spain today?

The reduction in stigma surrounding mental health is not receding as fast as we had hoped. Today, some of these diseases such as COPD, epilepsy, or Parkinson’s disease continue to be stigmatized due in part to a lack of knowledge within the general population. For example, people will attribute epilepsy to someone on the floor having seizures. The truth is that the disease is more nuanced than that.

Fighting the stigma is a significant challenge and accurate information needs to be provided to counteract the continuous rise of false information on the internet. Furthermore, patients do not wish to share their conditions, for example at work, because they believe they will be perceived differently. We are far from normalizing these diseases and we need to continue to adapt work and laws to contribute to this normalization.

How significant is Spain’s patient population for Parkinson’s disease and epilepsy?

There are close to 150,000 patients diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in Spain. The number of patients with epilepsy is almost double that number. However, there are many more patients with milder undiagnosed cases of these diseases.

What are the priorities when you communicate with the government?

Bial aims to communicate the overall benefits of its products to ensure patient access to all our therapies. We work to bring health solutions to everyone in need, assuring patients have access to innovative medicines which will impact their health conditions.

What are the benefits and differences between your products and those of your competitors?

Each product has different competitive advantages and different patient profiles. Healthcare professionals and patients are benefited by having alternative products to choose from when provided with accurate information about each product.

What do you believe is most needed in this recent trend in health sector investment?

More investment is needed in R&D as a sector that provides both innovation and economic benefit. Collaboration between public and private institutions is crucial to creating networks, spreading knowledge, and being faster to respond to medical needs.

Therefore, funds from public institutions need to be funnelled towards these efforts to prepare for future crises, such as the coronavirus, that require public and private collaborations to protect societies in regard to their health and economic wellbeing.

What can you tell us about Bial’s commitment to sustainability?

Bial integrates several entities and institutions that aim for the sustainable development of the planet and the construction of a more just and equitable society with a focus on promoting people’s quality of life, culture, health, education, the environment, and research and development.

Bial is committed to the Global Compact, and to the implementation of its ten principles relating to human rights, labour practices, environmental protection and anti-corruption.

We support a preventive approach to environmental challenges, promotes environmental responsibility and the use of environmentally friendly technologies. The company has the certification under the ISO 14001 standard – Environmental Management System since 2001.

For example, last year Bial completed the installation of 1244 photovoltaic solar panels, occupying an area of around 2500 m2, on the roof of the headquarters building. We are also promoting the adaptation of the car fleet to electric and plug-in vehicles and forged a partnership with the Forest Stewardship Council – FSC to make sure that our packaging and all the products we develop guarantee the FSC standards and come from sustainably managed forests.

We are also actively engaged in supporting a number of humanitarian and social causes, such as Pharmaciens Sans Frontières. Bial cooperates with a range of institutions on a yearly basis – hospitals, schools, universities, medical groups and patients' associations – which work to educate, raise awareness in, develop, and foster the wellbeing of society in general.

All these projects reflect our commitment and responsibility to continue to innovate in incorporating sustainability into business management, as well as the ambition to protect the environment and contribute to a sustainable economy.

In the next three to five years, what are your personal goals and what are those of the company?

My personal goals will be to continue contributing to the company and the pharmaceutical sector. Additionally, I want to take a more active role as a woman in pharma to promote equality and diversity in the sector.

Regarding the company we aim to transform Bial into a truly international company that shows significant and sustainable growth to fulfill our mission: bringing new drugs and value to society. In Bial R&D centers, located in Portugal and US, we are developing medicines to be marketed worldwide. The company expects to introduce new drugs on the market in the coming years, strengthening its international presence based on proprietary drugs and achieving its goal of supplying innovative products to patients worldwide.

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