

Stephan Van Nieuwenhove - Country Manager, Orion Pharma Benelux



If you see the impact of our medicines on people's lives and their families, such as with our Parkinson's Disease medicines, it drives you to continue making sure your actions make a difference

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Stephan Van Nieuwenhove of Finnish national champion Orion Pharma outlines the company's entrance into the Benelux markets, the significance of the recent acquisition of Belgian animal health firm Inovet BV, and his goals around making an impact for patients in Benelux over the coming years.

Could you start by introducing yourself and Orion Pharma?

Orion Pharma is a Finnish Company that has been operating for more than 100 years. Previously, I was working in various sales and marketing roles in big pharma companies, when Orion offered me the exciting opportunity to start the Benelux affiliate from the ground up, back in 2010.

Orion has around 3500 employees globally, with 3000 of them situated in Finland. Our portfolio in Finland is quite broad and includes proprietary products originating from in-house R&D, a broad generic portfolio, self-care medicines and veterinary treatments. The company has six production sites in Finland. Recently, Orion was also named in the local Belgian press, as in 2022, Orion joined forces with the Belgian company [Inovet BV](#). This is a veterinary pharmaceutical company specialising in medicines and health products for livestock. It has a production site in France, logistics and packaging operations in Belgium, as well as its own sales operations in Belgium, France, Hungary and Vietnam. The friendly acquisition will enable the creation of a strong

combined Animal Health business with further opportunities for growth.

Coming back to human medicines, about 14 years ago, the company decided to set up its own operations in mid-sized European markets, such as Belgium and the Netherlands. The Benelux offices are part of the Central European cluster which is also made up of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

In the regions, we focus on portfolios which suit local market situations best. Here in Belgium, our strongest branches are Respiratory (Asthma & COPD) and CNS (Parkinson's Disease). We also have a legacy in Critical Care, for instance, dexmedetomidine, coming from our own R&D, was an important drug in ICUs during the COVID period. Recently, Orion also entered into a global agreement with Bayer for our prostate cancer medicine. We are now working together with them to bring this promising drug to the patients.

You mentioned the company has quite a broad portfolio, but you get to decide which medicines come to the Belgian market, a bespoke approach. How do you go about selecting which products are launched?

All efforts are done to offer the innovations from our own R&D to the Belgian patients, this is a companywide strategy. Next to that, the different clusters are specializing in portfolios where the local markets are best suited for.

To bring medicines to the patients, you need to know the local market well, especially for us as when we started off, we were starved of large resources, unlike the established companies being present in the market for a long time. Therefore, we launched first into niche areas where we could gain larger market penetration with limited staff.

Next to that, finding synergies and partnerships with other companies is helping us to bring our medicines to larger target groups.

We are collaborating for 8 years with EG (Stada) for our asthma and COPD therapies and this partnership has yielded impressive results, coupled with our global collaboration with Bayer, this helps us in increasing our footprint in Belgium.

How challenging is it to find potential partners?

For sure it is not as easy as clicking your fingers, but it seems that the assets that we are offering are attractive for potential partners. Any partnership needs both sides to benefit, a win-win, or in the long term, the partnership will not be successful. Equally, timing is important as the lifecycle and strategy of a product and company shift over time, you must meet at the right period to grasp the opportunity and develop a common strategy serving the benefit of both partners.

Is this building of partnerships essential in the markets you control?

It is very much dependent on the market situation. Belgium is a prescription-driven market where you must go out and talk to the prescribers. Therefore you need to have the resources in place, in some situations, a shared effort with another company can create additional leverage.

In the Netherlands, the situation is different. The impact of the prescriber is more limited. Medicine choice is often decided by other stakeholders besides the prescriber. Pharmacists and insurers with preference lists play an important role in this. I would say, there has been a level of trial and error since we've set up the activities in the Netherlands. We needed this period to have a deep understanding of the market dynamics. We now managed to get our Respiratory portfolio successfully into the market at the benefit of more patients. We also see this positive evolution for the rest of our portfolio.

You have had some great results while keeping a lean organisation. What steps were taken regarding products to get to this point?

We began our journey in Belgium with our critical care products by bringing innovation to sedation in intensive care. This was a good area to start for us, as in Belgium you can enter this market with few human resources.

This move into critical care acted as a springboard to set up our businesses in Respiratory and later in CNS for Parkinson's Disease.

How do you attract staff to come to a company like Orion compared to a competitor with a more established name?

The journey from the first activities until today has formed the identity of Orion Pharma Benelux. In Finland, Orion Pharma has been the established market leader for years while in the more recently founded affiliates, like Benelux, we have to act as challengers to the main players. A big portion of entrepreneurial spirit, dedication and ambition is needed to succeed. The colleagues that are working here have lived this journey and inspired the newcomers to live the Orion values.

Most employees working for Orion Pharma Benelux have previously held positions in big pharma companies and are bringing in a lot of expertise. One of the reasons they come to us is that they want to take ownership of their activities and want to be multifaceted. We look to empower our employees and make sure they feel proud, responsible, and part of the success of Orion in Benelux.

Looking ahead, what are your goals over the next few years?

We want to make sure our medicines reach more patients. If you see the impact of our medicines on people's lives and their families, such as with our Parkinson's Disease medicines, it drives you to continue making sure your actions make a difference. Creating well-being for patients and Orion employees is the main driver of our local operations.

As a global company, we are focused on being completely sustainable and carbon-neutral by 2030. We also want to be sustainable in the way we drive our business, and interact with all stakeholders and partners. While optimising our current portfolio, we are also preparing new launches in the different therapeutic areas where we are acting.

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