Interview with Patricia Lanssiers, Managing Director, Eli Lilly BeLux

23.11.2012

Tags: Eli Lilly BeLux

Since 1969, Eli Lilly & Company has been investing in Belgium. Can you give our readers a brief overview of the company's history here and highlight some of your most notable achievements in your 4 years as Managing Director?

Eli Lilly & Company is a global leading American pharmaceutical company with headquarters located in Indianapolis, Indiana, US.

From the very beginning, Lilly has always been focusing on quality and innovation. This has always been done in line with our core values which are excellence, integrity and respect for people. These were my main reasons to join Lilly in December 2000 as Corporate Affairs Director for the Belgian affiliate.

Looking back at my last four years as Managing Director I would like to highlight our sustainable performance which has allowed us to consistently improve patients' outcomes. Having that said, I am convinced that having the right molecule for the right patient will lead to additional sustainable results over time.

On the other hand, I believe my role as Managing Director acts as the link between the internal and external environment ensuring that our organization is prepared for challenges and opportunities derived from the external environment. For that reason, my management team and I are continuously examining future prospects and trends while evaluating the adaptations that must be

made to seize tomorrow’s opportunities and overcome its challenges.

This is coupled with having the right people and the need to build on diversity. We have invested significantly into the development of our people who are committed, alert and have the right attitude to ascertain that we have the capabilities required to forge ahead.

In that respect, I believe my main contribution to the development of the Belgian affiliate stems from my external focus. After all, it is not inside our office walls where the real differences are made. Instead, they occur beyond these spaces, in the external environment where we gain feedback from our stakeholders and patients with regards to our existing products and those under development.

In addition to my responsibilities at Lilly, I aim to make a positive impact on the industry through my role as Vice Chairman of Pharma.be – the Belgian association of the pharmaceutical industry – by encouraging a favourable and sustainable development of the regulatory environment. Similarly, prior to Pharma.be, I have been Chairman of the LAWG – the Local American Working Group. Within this organization, we organized an event last year with the American Ambassador and key stakeholders aiming to increase awareness of the importance of the life sciences industry to the healthcare system as well as its contribution to overall economic performance.

What is the strategic importance today of the Belgian affiliate to Lilly’s regional operations?

Broadly speaking, Europe’s contribution to Lilly’s global revenues of €24 billion rests at about €5 billion. Within that, Belgium is in fact one of the biggest mid-sized affiliates in the EU, immediately after the classic five ‘big markets’ (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and UK). I believe that this puts us in a favourable position because, as a company, we are large enough to take advantage of existing opportunities while also agile enough to rapidly and effectively respond to the changing environment and explore new prospects.

In addition to being one of Europe’s largest mid-sized affiliates, Belgium plays a central role in Lilly’s clinical studies. In the same way that Belgium is a country that boasts the highest per capita clinical studies, Lilly hosts a significantly large proportion of its clinical activities in Belgium.

Moreover, Lilly also maintains a strong position within the Belgian market through our animal health segment. As you may know, Lilly has made a number of acquisitions in this domain including certain Pfizer Animal Health products and more recently, Janssen’s Animal Health product portfolio. Through these acquisitions, particularly that of Janssen, Lilly has increased its commitment to the country enhancing the strategic importance of the Belgium affiliate.

More specifically, can you provide our readers with overview of Lilly’s local product portfolio while highlighting your key growth areas?

Our local portfolio of products is very similar to Lilly’s global portfolio. In other words, we are active in our priority therapeutic areas such as oncology, diabetes and neuroscience.

Although having recently lost Zyprexa’s patent in the Belgian market, it remains one of our most important psychiatric drugs. In addition to this, we are experiencing growth in the oncology, neuroscience and diabetes therapeutic areas which counter balance the loss of incomes due to patent loss.

Taking a quick look into Lilly’s history, it is easy to spot the company’s pioneering and innovative spirit. To what extent is Lilly capitalizing on Belgium’s R&D strengths and innovative capacities to reinforce its own capabilities?

Considering that Belgium boasts one of Europe’s most favourable and rapid approval process for clinical trials, it comes as no surprise that it hosts Europe’s highest number clinical trials per capita. Needless to say, we are taking full advantage of this situation, shaping the Belgian affiliate as one of the most attractive destinations for clinical studies across Europe.

One of the key drivers of our strong presence in the clinical research sector is the high-quality standard of the universities and research institutions. Furthermore, Belgium is home to several well-known key opinion leaders in the therapeutic areas that we are focused on. This combination of Belgium’s outstanding academics and our dedication to innovation makes the country a highly attractive landscape for investment in clinical trials.

To put this into perspective, the pharmaceutical industry invests on average 16% of its revenues in R&D, the highest among all industries. At the same time however, Lilly invested in 2011, 21% of our turnover in R&D, illustrating our commitment to innovation.

One of Lilly’s stated goals is the development of innovative drugs by listening to your patients and adequately responding to their needs and requests in a reliable manner. How exactly do you go about doing this in the Belgian context?

We do so in two ways. First, at the core of our activities, Lilly sets out to ensure that we are able to deliver added value to our customer. Most importantly, in this way we aim to bring added value to the patient. As a fundamental aspect of that process, we strive to ensure that our people, across all departments, are well trained and have the right interaction tone in understanding a given patient’s journey.

Second, we are developing a number of initiatives or programs designed specifically to help patients cope with their disease. For instance, in diabetes we co-sponsored worldwide an interactive tool called “diabetes conversation”. With this, healthcare professionals can help patients to explore their disease and learn about it through a “mapping system” by fostering interaction and understanding.

Similarly, in the psychiatric domain, Lilly grants social reintegration awards, which are initiatives, intended to help patients reintegrate into their communities.

Hence, as a pharmaceutical company, we are well aware that our main role is making innovative drugs available. At the same time however, we also recognize that we are in the ideal position to face patients’ needs and provide the community with the means necessary for better and healthier lives. In other words, our aim is to go beyond just providing a pill or a drug.

Can you tell us more about the developmental focus of the company’s pipeline?

Indeed, at this point in time, Lilly does have a very rich and diverse product pipeline and we are certainly very excited about that. In fact, we currently have the richest mid-to-late stage pipeline in our history, representing a variety of therapeutic areas including cancer, diabetes, neuroscience and autoimmunity. We’re focused on developing a complementary mix of small and large molecules across our pipeline in order to address the diverse needs of the patients we serve.

Many have said that it is no longer sufficient to merely show that your product works, but it’s also essential to take into consideration the economic-health benefits relative to each product. Would you say you share this philosophy?

I do agree with this statement. However, I am also a firm believer that it is paramount to clearly demonstrate that your new product works better than that of the current standards. When you have demonstrated that your product provides added value to the patient and is safe and qualitative – three of the most important requirements to obtain regulatory approval – then we enter into the second part of the discussion: pricing and reimbursement at the country level. During this discussion other considerations come into the equation because it is also mandatory to demonstrate that a product is a good investment for the society to be granted reimbursement. But still, the basis remains the clinical results.

Collaborations seem to be great starting points for innovations. What is the importance of such partnerships and collaborations to Lilly in terms of ensuring continuous innovation?

Within the global context, we have initiated several partnership projects for the development of new drugs. One is with Boehringer Ingelheim for the treatment of diabetes. Another one is with Daiichi Sankyo and is focused on the cardiovascular disease area.

The EU has recently passed a new proposal for clinical trials regulations across the union which is set to erode Belgium's rapid approval processes competitive advantage. What is your view on this and what effect do you think this will have on your clinical activities?

Generally, I believe that harmonization on a European level is a positive development. However, Belgian stakeholders need to be aware that changes with regard to the clinical trial environment are approaching and should not be complacent about this. Instead, we all should proactively take the necessary steps in order to ensure that Belgium remains a competitive country to perform clinical trials, and allow patients to benefit at an earlier stage from the new molecular entities.

On the other hand, Belgium's academic expertise remains within the top worldwide and that will not change with the implementation of this new regulation. Therefore, although Belgium might lose out on some of its competitive advantages, it does still have a number of highly appealing elements that will continue to attract clinical activities to the country. Therefore, it is important for our regulators to remain vigilant to avoid depriving our patients and centres from early therapeutic solutions.

As both Managing Director of Lilly & the Boards Vice President of Pharma.be, how would you rate the relationship of the industry with the government and what is your main message to the local authorities?

As innovators in the pharmaceutical industry, we would like to see a system that is more predictable and sustainable. We would like to serve the patients and help to increase the quality of public health through the innovative drugs we develop. Clearly, doing so requires significant and long term investments. However, given the current environments unpredictability, and the fact that drug development takes on average ten years of research and development, we are facing some risks and uncertainties.

In my capacity as the Vice Chairman of Pharma.be, we are working on a long term agreement with the health authorities to agree on certain principles that are essential for the sustainability of the Belgian system. Likewise, we are jointly working with the government authorities on finding the solutions to keep the healthcare budget in control. After all, innovative pharmaceutical companies help to support the economy by providing high employment levels and investments while allowing patients to gain access to the latest drugs. Hence, providing a sustainable environment, as well as

the recognition of innovation, are crucial if we wish to see these companies continue doing so.

Nevertheless, I believe that there is a healthy level of dialogue and understanding with the authorities and we are making progress on reaching solutions that are mutually beneficial for both parties.

Considering the company’s 43 year history in the country, could you highlight some of Lilly’s local philanthropic activities designed to deliver measurable results?

We are participating in global activities that are rolled out locally. In fact, we are currently implementing a global initiative that will have one hundred of our local employees, including myself, offering help throughout the day to different centers dedicated to helping children, such as treatment centers, youth centers, and child shelters. Another global initiative we have implemented since last year is “Connecting Hearts Abroad”. This is a program where up to 200 employees from 38 countries can voluntarily participate in helping communities abroad. For instance, one of our selected employees was sent to Russia for a two week period to freely support and help children in psychiatric hospitals as well as elderly people in a day care centre.

Furthermore, we also organize a number of locally inspired support initiatives. One example is the Brussels 20 kilometres running race in which we have pledged to donate a given amount of money for every participant representing Lilly to a charitable organization.

Where would you like to take the Belgian operations of Eli Lilly over the next 2 to 3 years?

Our common vision for the future is really to achieve a “wow” effect towards our customers. This is also met by applying the highest ethical standards to our behaviours and interactions with external partners.

This does not only apply to our customers but also to the patients because at the end of the day our main goal is to improve patient lives and ensure that patients, who need our drug, live longer, healthier and more active lives.

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