Interview with Ana Govedarica, General Manager, Roche Serbia

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Tags: Roche Serbia

Roche is one of the oldest multinational pharmaceutical companies here in Serbia. How do you think your history in the country gives you an advantage today as a company?

We are very proud of the heritage that Roche has in Serbia, being present here for many decades, from the first product that went on the market 80 years ago in the local language. Roche's Switzerland headquarters is not very far away, and there is something to be said for the relationship between the two countries, and today many Serbians live in Switzerland. Roche first opened a representative office in Serbia in 1991. In 2005, we opened the local affiliate. Over this period of time, we have succeeded in developing professional contacts with stakeholders within the healthcare system: healthcare professionals, agencies and health authorities.

We recently completed a market research study, finished in January 2011. Last year we had some problems and as a multinational company we want to move forward based on factual knowledge of the market. We made the research in order to see where we were and what the perception of Roche was, and we are very proud of the results.

I do not necessarily think that our experience in the market is an advantage to us, because every day we have to prove ourselves to the market based on our expertise and knowledge – there is no free pass just because we have been here for a long time. We do have an advantage in the fact that we know the market well, and have spent a long time building mutual respect. Roche is one of the most desirable places to work in the Serbian pharmaceutical sector today, and I am very proud of that.

Even worldwide we are recognized as a very strong Roche affiliate, and we are very proud of that. We have high quality of people here, almost 95% have a university degree.

From your perspective as a Serbian citizen, how do you think outside opinion of Serbia and the pharmaceutical industry here differs from the reality of the situation?

We need to change a lot of things in order to be competitive in the same professional manner as other European markets. We need to set up clear procedures and transparencies, and as a result of the crisis we have a problem with liquidity in the Serbian pharmaceutical sector. When you have such a huge problem, it means that you do not pay attention to long-term development of the system. You are spending each day coping with the immediate situation.

Given this, how have you tailored your strategy here in the Serbian market? How has Roche approached the market in recent years and what is your strategy for developing the company here?

Our strategy is based on a five-year perspective. We would not be successful here as a company if we only planned on a daily basis. Our strategy is to be a successful company here in the Serbian market, and Roche certainly has the products in order to achieve this. We are moving purposefully, and we are a very brave company because we have taken the decision to stay committed purely to innovation. Innovation requires very knowledgeable and brave people, because any innovation demands courage. I am therefore paying a lot of attention to my people, in order to equip them to be knowledgeable in their work, so that we can transmit Roche's science to Serbia.

How has your portfolio evolved here in the Serbian context?

I will bring all Roche products to the Serbian market over the next few years. We also want to transmit the knowledge to treat patients with our complex products. Roche has had so many positive results in oncology that as a Serbian, I cannot rest until all these treatments are available in the country. However, I would like to see openness from all those involved in this industry. In many cases, the pharmaceutical industry is regarded in Serbia as a profitable industry, but profit is not something bad. I am always trying to promote the view that we should not be judged and blamed as an industry which is making profit, for profit brings progress and new products, and new ways of treating the patients.

We have heard that it has been quite a long time since any new drugs were added to the government's reimbursement list, since 2008. How has that affected Roche's business here, with your focus on innovative medicines?

It has affected Roche severely. We have tried to move the registration of our latest lung cancer treatments, but we cannot be angry because it is not just Roche that is being affected by this, but the whole industry. I think that the biggest problem here is that the patients are being affected by

this situation, by not having access to the world's latest medicines.

Do you feel as though the government has the right attitude to bringing in drugs in your therapeutic areas, particularly oncology?

I think they are seriously looking into it but the main problem is that the country's complete healthcare system received only small and not adequate funds of Serbia's annual budget. When outgoings like salaries are taken into account, it is clear that this is not enough to fund a competitive and efficient healthcare system.

The biggest challenge for the government is to strengthen the budget of the country, and then to revise the overall spending on healthcare in Serbia. I will not be happy if I see that they only put money into refreshing hospitals and buying new equipment. I would not be happy if they do not pay attention to salaries of all employees in the healthcare system. I will be equally unhappy if they only decide to spend more money on pharmaceutical products. The overall structure needs to be enhanced, and taken to the next level. Any kind of imbalance in the future will also lead to problems that will then need to be addressed.

In many of the developing markets that we have been to, we have seen that companies like Roche use clinical trials as a way to make sure that patients have earlier access to the drugs that they need. Is that something that you are doing in Serbia?

Yes, we have so many new and early phase clinical trials here, but it is often a struggle within our company to get clinical trials here. However, we are growing steadily in this area, paying attention to doctors and teaching them to be serious and punctual. Steadily, we have built a strong medical department within Roche Serbia. We now have medical managers, highly equipped and very well trained, clinical trial managers and monitors within the company so that the clinical trials are not only followed through CROs and other subsidiaries.

One thing Roche does around the world is work in collaboration with local universities and laboratories in order to bring a certain portion of R&D to the local market. Is that something that you are thinking about here in Serbia?

I am thinking about it. We have started some discussions, but at the moment I cannot disclose any information. But I think that the potential is here; we have a lot of young bright people in Serbia, but we need people to come here and lead them to the right conclusions. This will be one of my priorities in the future.

As well as being one of the longest-standing multinational companies in Serbia, we have seen that Roche also does a lot of good work in the community. Last year when there was a major earthquake in the south of the country, Roche committed a lot of money to help rebuild hospitals and facilities there. As a Serbian citizen, how are you trying to make sure

that Roche goes the extra mile in Serbia to demonstrate its commitment to the country?

We want to show that we are here when we need to be, and when any serious thing happens, if we are allowed and in a position to support and to help we will go forward to do it. Roche has been involved in many supportive projects that have not been publicized. We donate many products, and support both the government and the health authorities whenever help is required, but this is not a part of our marketing strategy. When you are serious about your commitment to a country, there is no reason for such activity to be part of our marketing strategy.

If we were to come back and see you in five years, what would you like to have achieved here?

I would like to see a balance in the total healthcare segment and a much healthier atmosphere in the system, because today the ambience is not an easy one. I would be very happy to see the total healthcare system progressing and developing, not just for Roche but for the industry as a whole.

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