Interview with Derek Williams, Vice President and General Manager, Vifor Pharma UK Ltd

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You joined Vifor Pharma to establish a new structure in the UK. It is quite difficult to set up a new enterprise—what have been the main challenges for yourself and the organization in the year since Vifor Pharma UK came into being?

I was actually the first employee of Vifor Pharma UK, which was exciting, but a little intimidating as well. Very clearly the main challenge was getting the right team together. Any pharmaceutical organization is only as good as its drugs – that’s obvious,but it is also only as good as the people that work in the organization so my first challenge was to start to assemble a really good team at Vifor Pharma UK..

We are fortunate in that our office is in a great location: we are very much in the heart of the UK pharmaceutical industry. So as a starting organization, with a small-company mentality and a small-company culture, with great potential for growth, we have been able to attract quality people to us that can share our vision of what this company could be.

It has been a challenge, certainly, but also a great opportunity to build up an organization right from its very beginnings.

What have been the main milestones for the company thus far?

We started in January 2010. Right now I think we only have one free position, so we have been very successful in hiring—very quickly—very good people to fill the roles. I think that is testimony to the company and what it offers; but it is also a function to how many good people there are in this part of the UK.

Have the sales progressed as quickly as the organization would have liked? Probably not. There are still some significant challenges in offering innovative medicines to the NHS, largely because of the length of their decision-making process and complications in their willingness to take up and adopt innovative medications. It is an area that could be a lot better— no doubt about it.

Vifor Pharma also acquired Syner-Med in the UK. What was the significance of this acquisition?

It was actually a 'TUPE'—a Transfer of Undertakings and Protection of Employment Rights. In effect what we did was carve out part of their organization in an asset transfer.

The clear attraction was that as Syner-Med had acted as our UK Distributor for several years they knew this market, knew these customers, and knew the product. So it made a tremendous amount of sense for us to transfer that knowledge into our new company—rather than start everything up from scratch. We have since used that base to develop a hybrid organization, which is part ex-Syner-Med, part ex-Aspreva (a previous acquisition) and part new hires. Together, we are now Vifor Pharma, with a very distinct, separate culture, but made up of many of the best parts of the previous companies.

Obviously, it is very easy simply to say that we will just bring all of these organizations together, combine their strengths, and live happily ever after. The reality is usually a bit more challenging, but that is the objective and we have already come a tremendously long way towards that goal.

How would you define the corporate strategy for Vifor Pharma UK, and what are your competitive advantages?

We are the world leaders in IV Iron and as such we are a very big fish in a relatively small pond..IV Iron is a tremendous therapy for the treatment of anemia, but as a therapeutic option it is probably still underutilized in the UK. There are other therapeutic alternatives—for example, you could take an iron tablet and many people do that regularly.. However, many of them have problems with absorption, or with compliance and side-effects. Simply put, the efficacy is not consistent.

Why do they take the tablet in the first place? Because they need their anemia to be treated or they need their iron deficiency to be treated. So, first and foremost, it is important that the therapy the patient receives works. The most expensive therapy of all is one that is does not work.

Therefore, the potential is massive for a better therapy. We believe we have such a better therapy, but we need to be able to communicate this more effectively to our customers.

It is always important to be well-aligned with the national healthcare system. How do you feel that your portfolio fits in with the priorities of the NHS in the UK?

We fit superbly—it is probably our biggest opportunity! Think about what QIPP means. First, quality: we have a quality product, which is better than anything else available right now. Our product is Innovative. It improves NHS Productivity dramatically: instead of going to a hospital five times to receive your drug; you only have to go once. And as for Prevention: I cannot think of better disease prevention than not having to go to the hospital in the first place.

So our product is a perfect match with QIPP. But—and unfortunately there is always a ‘but’—just because we feel our portfolio is a perfect fit for QIPP it does not mean that everybody else necessarily feels that way too. You also have to put this into the context that the people working in the NHS right now have a phenomenal amount of different demands on their time, have different targets, and have six top priority disease areas that they are focusing on—anemia is not at on that list. It is great to have something that is important to you, but it also has to be important to your customerand if they are working on those six areas, then they are not working on anemia. So clearly one of our challenges is to raise the profile of how important the treatment of anemia really is.

There are two ways to raise this awareness. One is education, and we are undertaking an education program to raise general public awareness about the disease, and the consequences of not treating the disease properly. Fortunately, we have had some great help with that.

The second way to raise awareness comes at this problem from a slightly different direction. We need to show the NHS that our therapy is more cost-effective—basically, that they can save money by using our product. With our newer product, as I have said, hospital visits decrease up to fivefold, and that translates to massive NHS savings in nursing time, transport costs, clinic costs, overheads, etc.

We have two simple, compelling messages: we have a better, more patient-friendly product to treat this disease and it should be used because of that. Secondly, not only does the product improve patient care, but it also saves the NHS, as a whole a lot of money. These are very strong messages to give.

If you have these compelling messages, why have you had trouble marketing your product thus far?

We do have some very good, compelling health economics data that we have put together. But what we are finding is that the NHS is such a multi-faceted organization, with so many people involved, that it is hard to find who to talk to. And it is never one person. It is always eight, ten, twelve, twenty different stars that need to be aligned in order to make change happen in the NHS. So one of our major challenges as a small relatively new organization is dealing with the vagaries of NHS bureaucracy. We find that this bureaucracy can get in the way of our efforts to work with them to improve the overall productivity of the NHS.

This is why we welcome reform in the health system—but it is reform that we are hearing good things about in a general sense, but is so far very light on detail regarding practical working. I do not think that you will find anyone that will disagree with the aims that were stated; they are patient-centric, they bring care closer to home and they are pragmatic. But the NHS is a big battleship to turn. It is going to be interesting to see how it plays out in practice.

To what extent is it important for you to be part of a bigger organization, like the ABPI, that can voice your concerns?

Industry associations are very important in dealing with the kinds of things that we cannot deal with on an individual basis as a small company. If I call David Cameron, he is not going to pick up the phone . So it is useful to have people that have the weight of the industry behind them to get to the discussion partners that we need, in order to be able to provide our input in the development of policy. In that respect, being an ABPI member is tremendously helpful—they can do things that we cannot do on our own.

If we look at your portfolio, you now market Venofer and Ferinject in the UK. How have they been performing, and what is your outlook for 2011?

Venofer is doing really, really well. It is still growing strongly after many years and is still a tremendous product. Ferinject, we believe, is the future of iv iron therapy in the UK—especially outside of hemodialysis. But that is the product with which we have been running into some issues regarding the speed the NHS adopts innovative medicines. I think it is fair to say that the NHS could have moved more quickly towards Ferinject than they have—we believe they are missing an opportunity and it is up to us to help rectify that.

Vifor Pharma has a broad pipeline globally. Which areas do you see having the most potential for the UK in expanding your portfolio?

We are very strong in nephrology, for historical reasons. But we are also very fortunate that—in just the last couple of years—we have published some really good data regarding the use of Ferinject in cardiovascular disease, particularly Congestive Heart Failure. And our most recent data is in gastroenterology: especially Irritable Bowel Disease, or Crohns. We think that our immediate growth opportunities lie in those areas; areas where we have the most robust data to support increased product use. And these areas are a good fit with the UK market.

What is the culture that you are trying to establish at the company?

When we were talking to people about joining the company, we were able to tell them that as we were a new company they had the opportunity to personally create the culture of the organization. That is important, because if you are joining GSK, or you are joining AstraZeneca, there is a set GSK or AstraZeneca way of doing things—or there is a thick handbook telling you how you will do it. The chances are we have probably never done that thing before; and we certainly do not have the handbook. We have SOPs, GCP's and GMPs, and we have every other 'P'—but most importantly we also have the ability to decide ourselves how we want to do things. – obviously within good practice and remaining compliant with all regulations!

We have a tremendously open culture. We talk things through. We are a small company, so everybody knows everybody. Everybody is free to discuss anything with anybody. And we are constantly looking at ways to improve things. Most people genuinely would prefer to have a job that they like, and one of the things that makes people like their job is when they feel like they can make a difference—here, each member of the staff has an impact on our decisions and our success.

We may be small, but we are very professional and very good in what we do. We will never be big pharma—we do not want to be big pharma. But we do want to want to be a small organization that is expert in the areas in which it chooses to operate.

What makes a Vifor UK employee different than any other, and what motivates them to stay with the organization?

I do not think that we are different. We are all people. I think what differentiates us is that we are never happy with the status quo—so we are continuously striving to improve things, to do things better, to improve our organization and ourselves. Does that make us different? I would like to

think that everyone operates in that manner..

We do not have a formal program to bind people to the company. But what we do have is a very good performance review program, which looks at what people are doing well, and looks at where they need to develop. We have a culture that means that everybody sits down and talks with their boss about what their priorities are, how well they are doing and what they are not doing quite so well.We believe that in that way, people's job satisfaction will increase, and that if they enjoy their work, then they are less likely to leave. Most people leave a company for one of three reasons: they are unhappy with their job content, the money they receive, or their manager. We believe we address these concerns proactively.

On a personal note, how satisfied are you with what you have achieved at the company in the last 11 months?

It has been a roller coaster ride, but it has been a lot of fun. I am very pleased with the organization that we have managed to build up here. I think we have a great atmosphere, a great culture, and great people. It has been a challenging 11 months, but I would not have missed it for the world.

If we come back in two years' time, what will we find at Vifor Pharma UK?

I hope that you will find the same culture, the same organization and the same happy faces. And you will find that we have grown significantly in the meantime.

We will have built up our portfolio as well. Right now, we are very dependant upon the IV Iron products—but just promoting one or two products to a specialty group is not the most efficient way of running a sales and marketing organization. Obviously, if you have more products to offer the same target audiences, you can run a much more efficient operation. So we are actively seeking to bring new complementary products into the portfolio,.You will find a very good specialty pharma organization, even more firmly established as the world leaders in IV Iron. We will be recognized as one of the best places for people to work in the pharmaceutical industry in the UK.

Finally, we will be seen as a company that works together with the NHS to improve productivity and performance in the therapy areas in which we operate.

I think if we achieve that within the next couple of years, we will have done a very good job.

What is your final message for the international readers of Pharmaceutical Executive Magazine?

We are a young organization; we are a new organization. But we have a lot to offer: to patients, and to the NHS, and to people who are looking to work at a company where they can make a difference.

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