Interview: Mercia Van Zyl – General Manager, Ferring Pharmaceuticals, South Africa



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The general manager of Ferring South Africa, Mercia Van Zyl discusses the company's ambitious plans for the future under the slogan 'People come first', the placement of fertility under the nation's therapeutic priorities, and how the company is contributing to an overall better healthcare system in the country.

Could you please give our readers an overview of Ferring's activities in South Africa and describe what direction you plan on taking the company?

The South African affiliate of Ferring was established as a marketing and sales entity in the year 2000. We started with Minirin®, Ferring's flagship product for bedwetting, and over this time achieved healthy growth rates. Today we have three different divisions: reproductive health, subdivided into fertility and obstetrics, urology and gastroenterology. However, if we want to continue growing we need to launch new products as soon as possible. Currently we are experiencing a sales *plateau*, as most of our products have been on the market for a long time, except for the recently launched obstetrics product, Pabal, and for Firmagon®, a GnRH blocker for advanced hormone-dependent prostate cancer. The major challenge we have—and it's applicable to most pharmaceutical companies in South Africa—is the slow registration time for new drugs,

which is hampering growth. We are, however, a very young and dynamic team. With enthusiasm and passion we may not be the biggest, but we aim to achieve the best with what we have.

With over 5,000 employees in subsidiaries operating in over 60 countries, Ferring Pharmaceuticals has become a leader in research-based, specialty biopharmaceuticals. How is the South African affiliate contributing to and helping maintain this positioning?

As the only Ferring Marketing & Sales entity in SSH South Africa plays a very important role, being the Ferring voice for much of the continent. Our contribution to the group's global turnover is less than two percent, as it is negatively impacted by currency effect, which devalues the growth we achieve because we import all products from overseas.

Have you thought about manufacturing locally?

We have manufactured one of our local entity products up until recently. Unfortunately we encountered manufacturing difficulties which we were not able to overcome.

Manufacturing in South Africa would obviously ensure maximum cost effectiveness and the ability to compete with generic companies. However, many factors need consideration and careful planning before such an important decision could be executed.

How would you evaluate Ferring's positioning among other multinational specialty biopharmaceutical companies present in the market?

We'll never be a GSK, a Pfizer, an Abbott or an AbbVie — or any other of the big pharmaceutical companies. But that's not the point, as we are not competing against them, but rather against ourselves: we are a very unique company with unique niche products. The products we offer are designed to save lives and to significantly improve quality of life. We value the relationships with our customers (and indirectly with the patients treated with our products) and strive to be the partners of choice for our physicians. This is the added value we offer to healthcare professionals and patients.

How has the company adapted its global portfolio to the clinical needs of South African citizens?

We do not offer treatments for South Africa's major problems, which today are HIV, tuberculosis and malaria; however, with our product Pabal® we make a significant contribution in the treatment of maternal hemorrhage, which causes extremely high death rates across the whole African continent. Together with Merck we are collaborating with the World Health Organization to advance

a new, proprietary formulation of carbetocin designed to be stable at room temperature, even in hot and tropical climates and are supplying Pabal® basically for free to several African countries. With our product Minirin® we are also making an important contribution to children suffering from bedwetting, who can grow up with severe psychological problems.

Which segments are serving as the company's growth drivers?

Fertility is one of Ferring South Africa's most important growth drivers with the gonadotrophin, Menopur.

In the Obstetrics division, we can contribute significantly towards the prevention of post-partum hemorrhage with Pabal, since South Africa's private market reports one of the highest rates of cesarean sections in the world.

Is part of the growth also coming from Sub-Saharan Africa?

South Africa used to be part of Sub-Saharan Africa; however, the Ferring Group went through a restructuring process, which made South Africa responsible only for Namibia and Botswana. The rest of Sub-Saharan Africa falls under META, which is the region encompassing the Middle East, Turkey and Africa.

Given Ferring's role in OBGYN to what extent would you evaluate the progress made in improving maternal health and reducing child mortality rates and what role do you see Ferring playing in creating more patient awareness?

I'm excited to see that the country's healthcare priorities are aligned with what we have to offer in terms of product portfolio. We are always open to work with the government to ensure as many people as possible can get access to our treatments. In the past we have actively promoted marketing campaigns in different media such as TV and radio to make people aware about available treatments. This is how we hope to encourage patients to be more proactive about their healthcare needs.

How can the country benefit from a greater emphasis and invest more on fertility, a therapeutic area generally considered an afterthought?

Today fertility treatment in South Africa is only available to a very small percentage of the population, as it is a 100 percent out-of-pocket expense. One can only speculate – at this stage – how the introduction of the National Health Insurance will change the treatment prospects for patients who can generally not afford infertility treatment. Ferring, as a leader in fertility

treatment, is open to discussions for increased patient access to our products. Some of the reproductive health specialists in the country are actively campaigning to lessen the burden on patients as well.

In what way does Ferring go beyond the current limitations of the country's healthcare system to support the remaining majority of the population that cannot afford the latest advancements in drugs?

Some of the products in the Ferring portfolio have been accepted on the national tender. This allows free access to the accepted medicines for patients visiting our public hospitals and clinics.

What type of innovative drugs does Ferring plan on launching into the market?

We want to launch in South Africa all products already available in the international global arena. We obviously evaluate the viability of each product in our South African market. Some of these products do not justify launch because of limited patient numbers. The main challenge to make this happen is registration time.

How can regulators best partner with MNCs to streamline the current regulatory scheme?

I do understand the government support for generics in a country like South Africa. Yet, I'm also very protective with regards to innovation. In healthcare innovation is needed for progress. Progress in health sciences is most important for the survival and continued wellness of our species.

Mutual understanding between industry and the MCC is of great importance. Regular and open communication can improve the relationships we have to the benefit of all parties involved.

The fact that there is a promise of improved processes and systems fills me with hope.

What sort of legacy do you envision Ferring leaving on South Africa's healthcare community?

I think we should continue to invest in people, and by 'people' I am referring to the local community, our patients, our physicians and our employees. Ferring is not always looking for the most experienced people, but rather for the right fit to help them develop together with the company.

We would like to continue contributing to saving the lives of mothers and infants, improving quality of life and providing treatment options our customers trust.

We believe that people come first at Ferring.

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