Interview – Christo Kruger, General Manager, Abbvie South Africa



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Abbvie GM for South Africa Christo Kruger highlights the various types of projects that the Public Health Enhancement Fund (PHEF) is pursuing to help alleviate the country's currently overburdened healthcare system. He also describes AbbVie's role in this industry collective, and also depicts the company's developing foothold within the South African market after its split from Abbott Laboratories in 2012.

A problem widely recognized by all stakeholders in the country is that the public healthcare sector is currently over utilized, understaffed, and underfunded. This prompted the creation of the Public Health Enhancement Fund (PHEF), as led by Nkaki Matlala. Can you describe the initial aspirations behind AbbVie's participation in this initiative and the type of impact you envision this fund having on the broader community?

Since the conception of the fund, AbbVie has been extremely interested in joining because it is only by gathering all these companies together that we could reach a critical mass in terms of resources. In the past, many companies have pursued independent initiatives, but the challenge was effectively governing these initiatives from an administrative perspective to materially impact one unified front—which oftentimes only served to dilute the results. The PHEF has helped us gain

efficiency, but also scale to facilitate greater impact, as a collective. The beautiful thing with the PHEF is that people all have a common objective in terms of creating capacity which will benefit the entire country.

I've been involved with this initiative since joining AbbVie in 2014. Having been recently appointed chairman of the marketing committee, I'm currently finalizing the publishing of the public report on the PHEF. In conjunction with this report, the committee is also rolling out a documentary that highlights the impact the PHEF had for the past two and a half years.

Government support from the Ministry of Health (MoH) has helped the steadfast development of the PHEF so far. But perhaps the most fundamental component of the fund's success, considering the minimally allocated administration and marketing budgets, is steeped in this voluntary public private cohesion—specifically with the amount of pro bono work donated by the professionals and the companies representing this collaboration.

How would you evaluate the progress of this campaign so far?

The scope of my role as marketing committee chairman has actually allowed me to develop a critical viewpoint on the PHEF's development thus far, whether it's by tracking performance metrics or obtaining invaluable input and feedback from our stakeholders. To elaborate further, three years ago, we had 75 students who participated in the program, which aimed at expanding the intake of medical students. Three years later, we've managed to maintain 75 students participating in our program—further highlighting the avid support and governance structures behind the PHEF. The ripple effect that these students will have through the sheer value that they will bring to their communities is simply remarkable.

Speaking towards our National Health Scholars Program, we have to date supported the development of 51 postgraduate students—many of whom are pursuing master's degrees or PhDs not only in areas of high unmet medical needs including TB or HIV/AIDs, but also other pressing therapeutic segments such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Spanning the lifetime of three core projects, and the broader fund itself, we've at least met the minimal level of expectations. For our objectives from this point forward, we're looking to create more public awareness for the PHEF and enlarge our membership to increase the critical scale of this campaign and the subsequent impact on the community.

Even if the situation in South Africa is a little bit unique, to what degrees do you see the PHEF becoming a reference model or being replicated in different countries?

I definitely see PHEF becoming a case study for future reference. The first priority for a country is to find a common purpose among all the companies represented, which in the PHEF case encompassed distributors, funders, managed care organizations, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, diagnostics as well as hospitals. Being able to find a common purpose among so many different stakeholders to be participants in investing in the common good of our country is undoubtedly something special. Going beyond standalone industry associations and pooling together insights, funds, and resources from each represented sector has created a truly groundbreaking vehicle for change—a model that I'm sure can gain traction among other countries. It is also extremely important that key stakeholders of the organization are also able to share and spread the vision of what a fund like this represents and how it's positioned.

Having worked extensively on behalf of international companies that appeal directly to the private healthcare sector, how would you evaluate the roles of multinationals (MNCs) in addressing the disparity between public and private healthcare with regards to improving access, funding, and quality?

MNCs have access to global resources in various areas. We sometimes have a limited view of resources but we need to look a little bit more broadly. MNCs possess invaluable insights with regards to operational efficiencies, supply chain systems and general components in running a business. These are fundamental pieces that MNCs can bring to the table for advice and consultation. The minister has launched a leapfrog initiative through the World Economic Forum (WEF) which is another avenue where we can offer resources to support their objectives. The PHEF is a financial mechanism to support projects, but the leapfrog initiative is a mechanism that brings a much broader set of issues and stakeholders together where we can support the minister and his task teams.

Given your role as general manager, please give an overview of AbbVie's activities here in South Africa and also describe what the focus of your current leadership directives are now.

AbbVie recently obtained its GMP license in September 2014, after separating from Abbott in South Africa on April 13, 2012. The first objective was to ensure we continue the legacy of servicing our patients with the same standards and values we have delivered for so many years. AbbVie's global strategy presented us with the opportunity to establish a unique AbbVie identity and have our customers understand the value that we bring to the South African environment.

As AbbVie, we have a portfolio of specialized medicines in terms of immunology, oncology, anaesthesia, neonatology and virology, specifically tailored to address the growing clinical needs of South African citizens. We're focused on continuous education within the areas we supply our medicine to ensure optimal outcomes. Access to Care is a division of AbbVie that supplies antiretroviral medicines to South Africa and other African countries. This demonstrates our commitment to addressing the region's health.

Our current focal point centers on establishing AbbVie as a truly patient-centric company by understanding what the patient goes through in accessing medicinal treatments. We continuously immerse ourselves hand-in-hand with the patients' journey and develop specifically tailored care to address their struggles accordingly.

A globally renowned biopharmaceutical company with the passion of both an entrepreneur and innovator, AbbVie has now become a multibillion dollar industry leader with more than 28,000 staff members spread over 170 countries. From your perspective, how does the South African affiliate contribute to and help maintain this positioning?

AbbVie has leveraged its specialized portfolio of therapeutic solutions to expand its footprint in 26 other African countries, while using South Africa as a base. We are developing centres of excellence in some of these African countries and making sure that the medicines are appropriately used by the specialists. We're even partnering with local specialists in South Africa to train up experts in these countries. Ultimately, we view South Africa, given its infrastructure and business-friendly environment, as a true base to support Africa and other countries in need.

R&D is the cornerstone of the any pharmaceutical company's continued success. To this end, how would you evaluate South Africa as an outlet for AbbVie's more biologics-focused clinical research?

So far in 2015, we've conducted a significant amount of clinical trials here in South Africa, especially considering the country's demographic representation as well as the scientific community of experts to enable clinical trial investigations. South Africa remains a key destination for the clinical research required for our future product developments. In 2016, we're aiming to expand on our clinical trials aligned to the global AbbVie corporation research priorities.

From the perspective of a leading innovator, how can the government help develop local capabilities to ultimately build a sustainable practice in more value-added pharmaceuticals?

The key driver for healthcare is to ensure we meet unmet needs in a sustainable way. Human capital forms an integral part of any healthcare system and it is in the interest of all stakeholders to find common ground in how we develop and invest in our local human resources. Another contributor to supporting local capability development would be is to ensure we are focused on developing scientific medical leadership through the investment in research and development in areas with a high unmet need.

Spanning your tenure as general manager, what would you consider your greatest milestones or achievements?

As a fairly new company, we have created an environment and culture that enables people to be successful in our core purpose of having an impact on the patients we serve.

I would like to proudly highlight the company's continued status as the top employer of choice for the third year in a row—an important characterization when it comes to attracting and retaining quality talent in the South African market.

You've more or less been at the onset of AbbVie's separation from Abbott. From a leadership perspective, how have you gone about defining a distinguished identity and culture to truly empower your staff members, while maintaining the ideals and principles of the legacy organization?

It's very important to go back to our true capabilities and values as an organization. AbbVie has the DNA of a truly specialized company with a significant focus on the patient and developing supporting solutions for these patients beyond the medicine. Therefore keeping the team focused on our core purpose and continuously improving on our capabilities we have enabled the local company to stay aligned to the principles of the legacy organization. As South Africans we have a responsibility to our country and making sure we represent AbbVie as a valued partner

As general manager, in terms of reputation, capabilities, and performance, where would you like to have positioned AbbVie in the next three to five years?

I would like to have AbbVie recognized as a key partner in South Africa from a healthcare perspective and positively impacting patients' lives as well as expanding our export ambitions beyond the 26 countries that we currently serve in Africa—ultimately ensuring that AbbVie's pipeline of innovative therapies gets channeled efficiently to benefit African patients.

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