Interview: Svatopluk Betina – Country Manager, Lundbeck Slovakia



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Lundbeck Slovakia Country Manager, Svatopluk Betina, reflects on the performance of one of the most innovative pharmaceutical firms in the region and the challenges companies face when introducing new products to the market

Can you please provide an overview of Lundbeck's presence in Slovakia and share with our audience the performance of the company in 2016?

Lundbeck has been operating in Slovakia for 22 years (established in 1994) and is still focused solely on the research and development of Central Nervous System (CNS) pharmaceuticals. Calculating the number of patients that have been treated with our drugs and their relatives we have positively influenced the quality of life of approximately one million people. We are really proud of our impact and we will continue to focus on our specialty – CNS. Right now, we are experiencing a transitionary phase because last year we introduced two new drugs to the market. An anti-depressant, Brintellix and an anti-psychotic injection called Abilify Maintena. In one year, we have managed to get two new drugs into the market which as an objective is far from easy. It is a great achievement but it is also a lot of work behind it.

Since you became the Country Manager three years ago, how would you describe the overall direction you are giving the affiliate as Country Manager? What have been your main priorities?

Ultimately, my priority is to do the best with the drugs we have. It was important to introduce the two new drugs to the market last year. Now, we have to prove to doctors and patients that these drugs are really better than those that came before. So we are still in line with our goal to help patients and deliver innovative products. Brintellix is our third anti-depressant drug so we have a really good track record in treating depression.

In 2014, we see that EMA approved Brintellix for the treatment of depressive disorders. Where does Brintellix currently stand in Slovakia?

So far it is going very well. Brintellix was released after a hiatus in the creation of new anti-depressant products. In comparison with previous launches in the Slovakian market, Brintellix is performing better than original products released both seven and ten years ago. It is a different drug with advantages that doctors and patients were perhaps less focused on. We need to broaden their understanding and picture of depression in terms of cognitive symptoms.

In terms of market access and reimbursement in Slovakia, the general view from your counterparts in other companies seems to be “it is not bad when comparisons are made across the CEE region, but could be better!” Tell us about your own experiences.

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My experiences of introducing new drugs to the market have been positive. We were able to introduce these drugs to the market without objections or lengthy discussions. We prepared a high-quality file and it was accepted in the first round which of course I am very happy about.

Overall, the key element to bear in mind when launching a new product in Slovakia is that the file you submit must be of the highest quality. Then you need to prove that you are within regulatory boundaries, as if you are outside these boundaries you enter a far more complicated process.

In several countries we have been to, particularly in the CEE region, we can report that a stigma exists towards mental illness. How would you say the perception of mental illnesses from authorities, the medical community and the Slovak people has evolved over the last 15 years, and how would you assess the ability of the current system to handle mentally ill patients?

You are right. There is certainly a stigma towards mental illness but from my observations in recent years I can say that especially in the public sector the perception has improved a lot. We are also supporting many non-profit making organizations who work in mental health. The stigma is still there but it has reduced considerably when compared to perceptions 15 years ago because now

patients are not hesitating with psychiatrist's visit until their conditions are unbearable. So it is definitely changing and from my experience psychiatric patients are really appreciative of the help they currently receive from CNS specialists.

You just explained you support non-profit making organizations. Could you explain some of the initiatives you have been using to fight the stigma?

One relatively recent example was in alcohol dependency where we were supporting organization that was able to interview a real patient who was receiving treatment and was speaking about his difficulties with alcohol. This helped to provide a different kind of alcohol dependency image than existing perceptions where those with alcohol dependency problems simply enjoy the consumption of alcohol and are often pictured on park benches. Here, audiences could see it is a real illness that is not only affecting this person but also his family. It is a slightly different story but I think it was a really good initiative.

People are now less ashamed to visit psychiatrists but the society requires more specialists. It is not always that easy to see a specialist because they have a limited capacity and they struggle to deal with more patients. But the number of patients with psychiatric problems is increasing; a statistic recently published shows that in 2015 the number of patients increased by 6%.

Excluding the need for additional psychiatric specialists, are there other improvements needed within the system to handle mentally ill patients?

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Mental diseases are not on the top priority list of Ministry of Health also because patients with mental diseases are less capable to speak out about their illness and fight for improvement of their life. However, deeper understanding of mental health is needed as untreated mental diseases may lead to invalidity, suicides and other negative impacts on society. Take Alzheimer's disease as an example. Everybody knows some jokes about dementia, but very few people admit the burden that only this sole disease is and will present for the whole system. Therefore, mental health deserves more focus from the side of our authorities.

In terms of products and therapeutic areas, what are the main value drivers for Lundbeck in Slovakia?

One side is the position of Lundbeck as a specialist company with a strong track record. We can build on our heritage that we have developed during our operations in Slovakia. In fact, this helps us in establishing partnerships with professional bodies. We definitely have a 'know-how' factor and

we are keen to demonstrate our commitment to our chosen specialty. We do not want to be seen as an organization that jumps from one disease to another. We are in a special position. Lundbeck has taken a strategic decision to focus on four diseases – Depression, Schizophrenia, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease.

How significant is your affiliate within Lundbeck's regional network?

We are operating in a small market so our contribution is limited. However, the impact of our subsidiary can be seen in our results. Within one year we have introduced two new important products to the Slovakian market with very nice market penetration.

What are your key priorities over the next five years?

Definitely, I would like these two new drugs to be fully established not as new products but regarded as real treatment options that specialists can deploy. Hopefully within 5 years, we will also be able to introduce something new from our pipeline to the market. Our commitment is to make the most innovative treatments available to the Slovakian people, and to spread these treatments as much as possible. We have a proven level of both efficiency and safety and we really believe in our products.

What would you say has been your proudest achievement over these last 15 years with Lundbeck?

There are several achievements that I proud of but to mention one – when I started at Lundbeck they were undertaking discussions about Alzheimer's treatment opportunities in Slovakia. I was able to push forward with these initiatives and introduce Ebixa successfully to the market. Now there are many treatment options but Ebixa is still being used by the market and I consider Ebixa in Slovakia to be "my baby". I am very proud about Ebixa's performance in the country.

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