Interview: Suzana Djordjevic – Director, Hemofarm Foundation, Serbia



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Suzana Djordjevic, director of the Hemofarm Foundation in Serbia, explores the themes of collectivism, social care and how individual acts can have profound outcomes in today's world. Having enjoyed a colourful career working for NGOs, the media and the Serbian government, Suzana has always allowed her beliefs and passions to guide her.

When you stepped into this role a little under three years ago at Hemofarm Foundation, what were your key objectives?

Back in 2015, my priority was to ensure that Hemofarm Foundation would become known as a health foundation. It has been active since 1993, with nearly 2,000 activities implemented in various areas in the total value of 11,5 million euros, but it wasn't perceived as a health foundation. Monitoring the needs of the society in 2015, Hemofarm Foundation put health in focus of the national campaign WHOLEHEARTEDLY. As a responsible member of the society, we understand all difficulties which the healthcare system is facing and we intend to improve, through a partnership relation with healthcare institutions, what is of the utmost importance to us – the health of all of us. We gave 20 donations in equipment in 2015 in order to improve the quality of services in healthcare institutions in Serbia. In 2016, we started the project 'The Most Important Call in Life' with an aim to raise people's awareness of organ donation, preserve life of those who wait for organs, and create a national consensus on the new Law on Transplantation. In 2017, together with our scholarship program for best students, we started a mentorship program as a

unique opportunity for young students to develop their personal and professional skills thus becoming a future positive change in the society.

Hemofarm is already saving lives. Why would such a company need a foundation?

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Hemofarm is a company engaged in pharmaceutical manufacturing, and therefore we primarily care for the health of the nation. Through engagement of Foundation and Hemofarm employees, we want to be a good example for others in the society, a leader of corporate social responsibility in the area of health, and show true and devoted care which will lead to improvement of the quality of services in the health system and better health of the citizens of Serbia. In 2016, we started the organ donation campaign as an important segment of the health system. Our aim was to contribute, through our engagement, to the efforts of the Ministry of Health and all doctors engaged in transplantation and make Serbia a member of the international organization Eurotransplant, thereby providing a better chance and much more hope to seriously ill people who have been waiting for an organ transplant for many years.

Are there other foundations across the Balkans with whom you would like to collaborate?

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Hemofarm Foundation is a part of the Serbian Philanthropy Forum which links us to many organizations and foundations that we collaborate with on different issues, such as for example VAT exemption from donations. If we succeed in it, we will increase donations to the society. It is a very important topic to us because we had a situation in 2015 when Serbia was affected by fatal floods. If we hadn’t had VAT on donations back in that time, there would have been more donations to the affected areas. We should always keep that in mind when we discuss such an important matter as VAT exemption from donations.

What do you take into account when forming partnerships with governments and organizations?

Health should be a priority to the whole society but in order to make a difference, you need to involve the whole society to work together. Natural partners to a foundation such as ours are not only representatives of institutions but also NGOs, the media and people who are famous and can easily spread the message. Young drives are also our target because they are the future bearers of the positive change in the society. Within the program WHOLEHEARTEDLY FOR THE YOUNG DRIVE,

we have been motivating best students to acquire new knowledge and improve skills in the fields of medicine, pharmacy, pharmaceutical engineering, environmental protection. Since our establishment, we have granted scholarships to the best 3,360 candidates, and in 2017, we started a mentorship program as a unique educational opportunity for young drives to develop their personal and professional skills. We have paired each student with a Hemofarm mentor who provides valuable leadership to the relevant student by sharing experience and insights, and providing career guidance.

How do you like to get involved personally?

I often remind myself of Gandhi's quote 'Be the change you wish to see in the world,' so I try to live in accordance with that quote, be a good example and be involved as much as possible.

One of the projects I'm really proud of is the organ donation project entitled 'The Most Important Call in Life'. We have managed to involve the whole society to work with us in order to change poor results in the area of organ donation. In 2016, Serbia was at the bottom of the European scale in terms of the number of donors, and thus in terms of transplantation.

We have started the campaign because we believe that it is possible to change the mindset of people regarding organ donation. Changing the mindset of people is a long and difficult process, but our society is traditional, people are not sufficiently informed and educated about organ donation and they don't actually know that it is a simple act of kindness, and at the beginning it is only necessary to sign a donor card to become a donor. Prolonging someone's life is the most human thing one can do for someone else.

In 2016, there were as few as two donors per million people which is a frustrating figure. There were thousands of people waiting on the list for organs and transplant surgery, and we felt the need to do something about that.

The focus of the project was on patients and their stories and emotions. With their stories, we wanted to provoke empathy of the society, mobilize people to sign donor cards in order to preserve someone's life, as it can happen to anyone. There is actually 20 percent more chance that you will need an organ than become an organ donor.

There was much to be done. Our first target was to amend the law and align it with the European laws on transplantation. Having launched the campaign with our partner, the Ministry of Health, we have made progress by establishing the National Donor Day on June 6th. The year 2017 will be remembered as the year in which Serbia made the biggest step forward in organ transplantation.

We increased the number of donors from two to 4.2 per million citizens. According to the statistics of the Department of Biomedicine, encouraging data indicate that there were approximately 160 thousand donor cards signed in the first six months of 2017, which moved Serbia one step higher on the donorship map. The number of donors in 2017 was 40, which is three times higher compared to 2016 when there were 14 persons whose families gave consent for organ transplantation. Owing to organ donors and their families, 92 patients in the waiting list were given the opportunity of a new life. Unfortunately, this is still less than 10 per cent of those who are waiting for a new organ, but it is better compared to the previous period.

I would like to emphasize that within 'The Most Important Call in Life' campaign of Hemofarm Foundation, we have managed to unite representatives of the Government, health workers, international society, NGOs, media, celebrities and citizens to send a unique message about the need of creating a national consensus on passing the new Law on Transplantation and encourage those who still have doubts by their personal example, discuss this topic, which is often unreasonably made a taboo subject in Serbia, within their families.

A large portion of work at Hemofarm is dedicated to sustainable development. Indeed, you've been publishing reports for five years in this area. How do the two initiatives react with one another?

Sustainable development is a story about how to become better in everything you do, how to show more respect to people and community in which we work and live, save resources and preserve the environment. Hemofarm is one of the regional leaders in sustainability, achieving the highest results in applying sustainable development in business operations. We, in the foundation, are trying to implement the sustainability philosophy in our daily work and implement the projects which can improve people's health and preserve the environment. In 2016, Hemofarm earmarked around 410 thousand euros for supporting the health system, education, culture and sports through activities of its Foundation. 'The Most Important Call in Life' campaign aimed at raising social awareness of the significance of organ donation was an example of how this company and its foundation fought for direct sustainability – the sustainability of life.

You raised over EUR 400 thousand last year in 113 activities. What are the plans for next year?

The year 2018 will be the Foundation's anniversary. We are celebrating 25 years of existence and nearly 2,000 implemented activities throughout Serbia. In 2018, we are planning to continue investing wholeheartedly in projects which will bring about a positive change in the society.

What is your favourite project that you have been involved in?

The Most Important Call for sure. It is ours most valuable and most awarded campaign which has gathered together the whole society into the same direction of creating the national consensus on the new Law on Transplantation, which is still pending.

I also love projects that engage employees because such activities are always rewarding taking into account the huge impact they have on the society.

We have recently invited employees to help ’The Shelter for Adults and Elderly’ in Belgrade and donate hygiene and cleaning products. In two weeks, we collected one tone of needed products and donated them to this institution for urgent and operational protection and help. And it is not the first time that the reaction was beyond expectations. What makes me most proud is that all our actions come from people, their hearts and are intended for people and their wellbeing!

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