Interview: Gordana Juran Zdravkovic – Country Manager, BIOTEC International, Serbia



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Gordana Zdravkovic has overseen the progression of BIOTEC International, Serbia through thick and thin. With over 25 years' experience in the life sciences industry, she has put together a fantastic team of young professionals eager to take advantage of Serbia's teeming pharmaceutical landscape. In this interview, Gordana sheds light on new projects for 2018, Belgrade's status as a hub for Eastern and Western convergence, and why now is the right time to venture to the White City (Belgrade).

What is unique about your service offering? What separates you from the competition?

BIOTEC has over 25 years of business expertise and one of its unique company features is the portfolio of world-wide companies which BIOTEC represents. They cover different areas of innovative new technologies, which are proven on the world scale and in Serbia are under development. BIOTEC brings innovations in our health care system.

I have a Masters in chemical engineering which I finished at the State University of Technology in Belgrade. The department is based on the famous MIT institute (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and focuses on the development of new technologies and I received the October Award of the City of Belgrade.

My professional orientation was always development and scientific work in the area of new technologies in medicine.

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I have combined two professional loves in engineering and medicine and found great inspiration in bringing the latest technologies to medicine. After establishing of my company BIOTEC in 1991 I took over responsibility as agency for representation of innovative companies in the area of clinical chemistry equipment – BAYER Diagnostics, which was bought by Siemens – for more than 20 years. The project focuses on the area of immunochemistry, hematology and biochemistry for the whole ex-Yugoslavia territory and has as its purpose the implementation of latest technology in big Clinical Centers, military and civilian hospitals within big companies.

BIOTEC has navigated through turbulent times in Serbia from the 90s to our current stage where the environment is geared to growth. From our pioneering beginnings where we immediately represented the biggest medical companies in Serbia, we now work in representing and placing sophisticated diagnostic equipment, laser surgery equipment, equipment for vaccine production, intervention cardiology device, and medical devices and materials for operative theaters. We have a resilient spirit and were one of the first independent medical companies when we founded in 1991.

At BIOTEC, we benefit from a highly-skilled and educated workforce of employees that are specialists in engineering, medicine and trading. Our ten staff members are optimists and benefit from a can-do attitude which is vital in the Serbian market which is full of surprises. What I most like is the inspirational, creative spirit that the team brings to the table: we are highly-skilled doctors and engineers who capable of thoughtful reflection – of taking the measure of situations.

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On top of this, the relationships that we have with our business world-wide partners are specific and go beyond the conventional definition of a partnership; we go beyond ‘commercial relationships’, to ensure that our connections are well-maintained, personal and professional.

We are also very particular in our selection of partners. We have varied and extensive experience in our line of work, having worked with the biggest and most acclaimed medical institutions in Serbia: The Military Medical Academy, the Clinical Center of Serbia and other Clinical Centers – Niš, Novi Sad, Kragujevac – and regional hospitals. We also work with most specialized institutes like Institute for Cardiovascular Disease Dedinje, and cardiovascular/oncology/pulmonary Institutes in Sremska Kamenica, etc.

The company BIOTEC International was established and designed as an exclusive agency for several famous medical producers, initially for the whole territory of ex-Yugoslavia. First we partnered with BAYER Diagnostics and have worked together for more than 20 years, and BIOTEC managed to succeed in implementing new technologies and the latest equipment in all relevant medical Institutions.

Even during wartime and when Serbia suffered strong economic sanctions, by BIOTEC’s continuous expert support, the biggest medical Institutions managed to keep the highest standards of laboratory diagnostics. The quality was as high as Europe and this partnership remained trustful and worthwhile for the medical system.

During this period, thanks to the implementation of sophisticated equipment in hematology, we took part in a big project on bone marrow transplantation, established with one of our biggest partners, the Military Academy.

In the spirit of continuous exploration of new scientific levels and possibilities in clinical chemistry and new immune markers, BIOTEC has made another significant implementation recently. We have partnered with a very innovative company, SNIBE, which develops patented technology of nano-particles for the application of unique tests of tumor and bio markers; it is very highly advanced technology.

Recently, we finished the evaluation of the biggest machine at SNIBE in the Clinical Center of Serbia which yielded excellent results, including unique immune parameters. These parameters are specific bio and tumor markers which contribute to more sensitive levels of diagnostic in gastro, pulmo, cardiac and metabolic disorders. These would benefit mostly specialized clinics and overall diagnostic in specialized institutions like the Clinical Center.

The new levels of diagnostics in the Clinical Center of Serbia brings a new perspective of sophisticated diagnostics and treatment of patients.

Just recently, our company donated equipment from SNIBE to the Institute for cardiovascular disease, DEDINJE in Belgrade with the aim of following transplanted patients. This comes off the back of a newly established Project of Heart Transplantation in this highly specialized Institute for Cardiovascular Disease.

Thanks to development in new technologies, BIOTEC has discovered a new innovative coronary stent: COBRA PzF, from company CELONOVA, USA, which is applicable in nano-coating with the patented polymer Polyzen F, which is patented by NASA.

This is the area of intervention cardiology where bringing this sort of revolutionary stent brings solutions for high-risk bleeding and diabetic patients (both FDA approved), due the fact that unlike the conventional DES stent, therapy of DAPT (dual-antiplatelet therapy) has been significantly shortened from 6 or 12 months to only 4 weeks which brings big benefits for patients but also big financial savings in shorter drug therapy.

In interventional cardiology/radiology we are also launching in our market new companies – RAD PAD and SIS Medical, as well as Envision Scientific in the field of coronary stents and drug eluting balloons.

Of course, the present market of coronary stent, especially in our country is not easy. This is largely due to the domination of earlier categories of BMS and DES stents (drug-eluting stents) covered with the cytostatic drug, that comes with a recommendation of minimum six months DAPT therapy. The COBRA PzF stent, beside the fact that patients are saved from prolonged therapy using drugs, also makes significant savings for the budget, but, sometimes this fact disturbs pharmaceuticals companies, and it is not so easy.

In surgical field development, BIOTEC has chosen a highly innovative company in for laser surgery equipment by signing exclusive Agency Agreement with the company LISA, Germany. LISA is a superior innovator and producer of laser surgery equipment for area of urology, gastro surgery, pulmology, and thanks to the unique methodology of bloodless methods, without thermal effect, this is the only laser capable to support neurosurgery operations.

BIOTEC has a very long and excellent exclusive Agency partnership with the biggest and most famous world producer, the company of the highest profile in medical devices in area of anesthesia, urology and surgery – TELEFLEX RUSCH, which has the highest quality features, especially in materials and designs for ‘infection prevention’, which is both for patents and doctors. The primary goal is in the area of demanding surgical procedures.

Furthermore, in the area of anesthesia, BIOTEC has established and in compatibility with TELEFLEX RUSCH, a long term exclusive cooperation with the company DIMAR, Italy, for non-invasive mechanical ventilation. By producing innovative generators for fast recovery – mostly in cardio and pulmonary patients – where BIOTEC has donated and installed equipment in Military Academy, Clinical Center Serbia – cardio surgery and pulmology Clinic, Clinical Center Nis – Clinic for anesthesia and also on Institute for cardiovascular disease Dedinje.

Since 2005, BIOTEC has been the exclusive Agent of ALFA WASSERMANN in the area of clinical chemistry equipment, and also equipment for producing vaccines. Worldwide famous company

ALFA WASSERMANN has over 90% market share, and BIOTEC has installed ultracentrifuge through the credit of the World Bank in our Institute for virology Torlak. Soon it is expected that this Institute would overtake vaccine production as it will be able to export produced vaccines in the region.

How important is new technology to BIOTEC?

Company BIOTEC is designed primarily for implementation of new technology in medicine and through development of BIOTEC we have signed exclusive Agency Agreements with innovative world producers company from Germany, USA, Italy, UK and recently it is important to mention that eastern countries, mainly China have managed to develop some very impressive technologies and this balance for general improvement in technology growth is necessary in the world.

As we have created a company by joining very educated young and skilled people in a multidisciplinary approach of combining medicine and engineering, I am satisfied because BIOTEC is developing according to my vision, in fulfilment of its sometimes very demanding engagements, in transferring of knowledge and bringing new scientific approach in medical discipline in our country.

This process is sometimes very long and demanding and it really takes to generate the best of all of us with aim to succeed.

How did the company perform this year?

We have had a healthy year of growth and recorded this through market feedback.

We have just finished evaluation of the biggest equipment in the Clinical Center Serbia for clinical chemistry with excellent results in special parameters and since in this year we have made significant introductions of new technologies to the biggest institutions, these good results would certainly improve excellent performance which we expect.

In this year we have managed to finalize most of our big activities and investment in introduction to key opinion leaders in all areas of innovative technology where our company is engaged. I am very satisfied because we have managed to get very positive feedback from the market which is very difficult for launching new technologies.

The reason for that is certainly strong orientation of our Government and Ministry of health who are trying to bring new visions and strategies of developing the health care sector for the next five years and in this perspective, approaching closer to EU countries. Certainly, new technologies

today are better placed and that aligns with BIOTEC strategy.

The government’s committed engagement to the healthcare sector started to give very positive results in planned purchase of necessary equipment which has not been renewed for a long time, and in this perspective we are expecting the latest technology for laser equipment, or the latest generation of coronary stent COBRA PzF. This would find its place through enabling bloodless surgical procedures, a better cost benefit for hospitals, shorter hospital stays and less drugs used, especially in coronary procedures. Consequently, the health care sector is brought together for higher standards, for same or lower overall costs, which is the aim of each developed country.

Where is BIOTEC present?

Historically, BIOTEC and I, personally were present in the whole territory of ex-Yugoslavia, as being the leader of Agency for representative of the biggest world famous companies. Due to political changes, nowadays, we cover Serbia and Montenegro while taking a keen interest in the Balkan region. Our company has the capability and skills to cover vast territories, as it did in the past. This is interesting to our international partners and the companies that we represent.

Belgrade and Serbia with its unique position has always been interesting for both East and West and what is becoming very clear these days is that Serbia is bringing again back its leading position in tracing highest standards including in health care sector and taking dominate role in region and surrounding countries.

What are the main dynamics in Serbia and how do you adapt to them?

If we look back ten to fifteen years, the Serbian healthcare system was wounded, and BIOTEC managed to steer through this troublesome period with a positive and persistent attitude. The current state of affairs is correct, in that we now have a market that is full of foreign interest and domestic companies who have high levels of regulation and output. Having lots of competitors is healthy and encouraging as it inspires growth. Regarding tender procurement, the processes are efficient although there could be some improvements in bringing innovation to the market. Tender acquisition, in particular, is an area where we could align with our Western European neighbors, i.e. to leave more space for high quality products, which ultimately in the long term, saves money in the budget.

All purchases are bound to public procurement rules which sometimes are strict and sometimes not easy to adopt to special equipment of hospitals, in implementing higher standard equipment and materials.

What would bring improvement in public procurement is certainly adequate adopting of responsible laws in the area of opening quality criteria and not only price, what is necessary for high technology or capital equipment, which would open better and more realistic competition.

Having in mind that BIOTEC is representing only high quality and high technology medical producers, we certainly hope that in the near future we would bring adopting of the market, in moving towards higher quality, which is also the aim of the Ministry of health.

Where will we see BIOTEC in five years?

We expect that the significant investment and big engagements we have made in recent years in bringing new technologies to the Serbian health sector will start to bear fruit. And overall satisfaction of patients and our big partners. This would bring BIOTEC on a high level partner in our country. We certainly expect expansion into surrounding markets.

We believe this is achievable for many reasons: we continue to do our business at a high level, our background provides us with fantastic pharma experience, and we have great relationships with our partners. It is not an easy path that we take, but we thrive on the challenge. Following careful investigation, we have been meticulous in our selection of the companies that we work with, and therefore we know that we will continue to grow over the next five years.

If the coordination between the Ministry of Health and hospitals keeps improving to find common solutions for hospitals and healthcare, then we will progress further. It is not a question of budget; it is a mindset – we need to provide the best, most efficient solutions with the substantial money that is allocated to health care.

How do private and state health care work together in Serbia?

However, it must be said that the nation has suffered a lot over the past 25 years, and it is only in the last five to ten that we see excellent progress in the pharmaceutical industry. Serbs still suffer from high levels of cardiovascular disease and we would like to contribute and make a positive impact. I think entry to the EU will be useful regarding increasing the quality of healthcare that we provide and the field of medicine. That’s not to say that we don’t already adhere to proper regulation, but the implementation of EU standards will ensure that all players in the industry are involved.

We need to leave to our children a powerful legacy of an organized, clean and honest country and the medical sector is a great place to start this. Profit is not the end goal; this should be patient care – approached honestly. It is best to take the habits and traits that make you good in life and

bring them to business models.

Serbia has become a very humanized and developed economic model and the time to invest and explore the country is now.

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