

Interview: Branislav Kotlarik - General Manager Balkans Region, Ferring



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Branislav Kotlarik, Ferring's general manager for the Balkans - whose remit includes Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria as well as all of ex-Yugoslavia - gives his insights into managing such a diverse region; Ferring's commitment to reproductive medicine; and the intricacies of gaining reimbursement for innovative products on the Serbian market.

What are your responsibilities as Ferring's Balkans manager and what were your priorities upon taking the position?

I joined Ferring ten years ago. When I came to Serbia, it was still Ferring Adriatics in this region – comprising the seven ex-Yugoslavian countries – and my priority at the time was to build the team. We now have a new team in this region. At the end of 2017, Ferring created more clusters within Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), one of which is the Balkans and Hungary cluster which consists of 12 countries. One of the priorities for this cluster is to find synergies among the countries as well as bring new solutions to help improve the lives of the patients.

In this market we are facing the huge complexity of managing 12 quite different countries, some of which are in the EU, some of which are not. We have to adjust our strategies to every individual market in order to succeed here. Ferring affiliates in the region have different states of development and different structures. In a few markets we have fully fledged legal entities that handle distribution, whereas in others we only have marketing departments, and in others we

operate through co-promotion agreements with distributors. All of the activities engaged in in this cluster must be tailored to the individual markets.

What is the logic of managing this region from Belgrade?

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Serbia is the biggest market in ex-Yugoslavia in terms of population and it sits in the center of the cluster with very good connections by air and road to the rest of the region.

How many employees do you have in the cluster?

In the Adriatics we started with ten employees, but if you take the whole cluster it is nearly 60.

How is Ferring's global offering translated to the Balkans region?

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In our region, we follow the global footprint quite closely with reproductive medicine and women's health as our strongest therapy areas, followed by gastroenterology and urology. We are launching new products in fertility, so our goal is to become the market leader in the mid-term. Fertility represents one third of our revenues, with a potential to grow to around 40 percent.

How do you convince stakeholders of the importance of investment in fertility?

Ferring is a company working in a niche segment and fertility is a segment which requires a high degree of specialization as safety is a top priority. We are committed to helping people become parents and to keeping mothers and babies healthy, from conception to birth. In this respect, Ferring is a specialized company and we are providing the best available treatment in fertility.

Fertility is not only the domain of the government, but also the private sector. The Serbian government is only partially supporting the reimbursement of fertility; mostly the procedures but we are trying to facilitate discussion between the government and the organizations in fertility. In Romania, we have an example of a project of helping women to plan parenthood. The women based on few tests with their doctor can identify their ovarian reserve. With this information they can plan when they want to get pregnant based on their career or other factors.

How does Ferring navigate the Serbian healthcare system and get market access for its products?

In Serbia, reimbursement is very complicated. The health insurance fund was closed for quite some time and even now the government budget for innovative drugs spending is limited and only innovative drugs from a select few therapeutic areas are being considered for reimbursement. We have been waiting for one of our products to get reimbursed for over five years and our market access manager and myself are in discussion with the health insurance fund on this. The fund has neither rejected nor approved any proposition of price from us, so we are somewhat in limbo.

What do you see as Ferring's role in fostering a better healthcare environment in Serbia?

People come first at Ferring. Patients using our products and physicians prescribing them have a right to expect that we will only make available those products in which we have full confidence. We will offer the best possible products at the most reasonable cost. Ferring's employees will always display courtesy and respect and act professionally. We always try to act professionally and as a partner to health authorities. Sometimes we face the challenges, i.e. during reimbursement approval process where mostly the price impact on the budget is considered. However, if we look on total hospital spending in case the treatment is not provided, this might be sometimes higher. There is still a long way to go.

Ferring describes itself as a 'multi-national, multi-local' company with a lot of autonomy granted to regional affiliates. Would you go along with this and how would you define Ferring's company culture?

We are working in a region that is extremely diverse. What this 'multi-national multi-local' approach brings is flexibility to adapt our activities to this diversity, allowing us to move faster and tailor our services to the specificities of the markets we serve. This might not be the case for Big Pharma companies employing a more top-down approach.

What changes do you hope to see in Serbia and at Ferring over the course of the next five years?

In Serbia, I see a country that will grow. Serbians are very entrepreneurial and willing to work so in that aspect I feel the country will progress. Serbia is on a good track for harmonizing its legislation with EU standards, even if the actual date of accession keeps being postponed. Even if the country is not in the EU, it will be closer in terms of legislation, making doing business easier. Hopefully, in terms of healthcare, the country will become open to innovation, which is crucial in giving Serbian patients access to the best possible treatments. Subsequently this will also be good for the national economy in allowing people to get back to work and not stay in the hospital for extended periods of

time.

For Ferring, by 2023 we would like to increase our market share in the region. We have plans for growth faster than the market average. We would like to bring our best products and services to Serbia and – as a socially responsible company – we are trying to bring benefits other than drugs to patients. This includes going beyond the pill and advising patients on what can help their quality of life.

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