Interview: Krzysztof Popławski – General Manager, Baxter Poland



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Krzysztof Popławski, general manager of Baxter Poland, discusses the Baxter Education Center, the largest educational program for a European affiliate, and its role in raising the awareness within the Polish medical community. Furthermore, he highlights the key growth drivers for the company, the overriding need to better treat and diagnose patients within the renal area, and long-term goal to double revenue in the next ten years.

This is your first general manager role. How have you enjoyed the experience thus far?

My previous roles were regional sales roles at various companies and were a great experience to set me up for my first general manager role here at Baxter Poland, especially during a time we are transforming the company. Additionally, the Polish medical device market is booming, compared to the stable state of the Polish pharmaceutical industry. Aspirational wise, my objective is to always be the best and to be a top quartile company. Thus far, myself and our excellent 200 strong staff have been able to successfully achieve this.

Baxter in Poland over the last 18 months has gone through some important changes. On that note, what are the current operations of the affiliate?

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At the start of 2017, we went through a stage of closing down Baxter's Polish production site. This site had been purchased from Polfa Lublin many years ago, and its was strategically more efficient, especially from a cost perspective, to grow our other European production sites, rather than upgrade the facility capabilities of the Polish factory. Many of the people working there were given the opportunity to continue their growth within Baxter through our European factories, in the UK, Spain and Italy,

Overall in Poland we have decided to focus on educational activities. We have built up the Baxter Educational Centre that is a 500 square metre, four room set-up that educates the Polish medical community and Polish society within the entire medical approach related to the company's therapeutic areas of care. This allows Baxter to work in a partnership with key stakeholders, and we are in very close contact with universities as well as medical and patient associations. Furthermore, we have built up our advisory board to understand the market and medical environments inside and outside Poland, and such a large, bold educational center is a European first for the company. This is a completely different approach and we are constructing a totally new future experience.

All in all, this is extremely important as today we see many untreated Polish patients, not only in the renal field, but equally in the hospital sector. The use of innovative technology is a game changer for doctors and patients, and Baxter wants to lead the way in shifting Poland towards rewarding innovation quicker.

What the main growth drivers within Baxter Poland's portfolio?

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Recently, our main growth drivers in the hospital market have been anaesthesia. We have a clear innovation in this sector and are working hard to educate the relevant medical personnel. This innovative process allows patients to return home faster after surgery and with less harm to their body. Baxter Poland has experienced double digit growth for the last three years in this therapeutic area.

Secondly, out educational reach in parental nutrition has payed off, and equally we have witnessed double digit growth.

Our third double-digit growth pillar is the renal sector, in acute therapies through the intensive care unit and our innovative PRISMAFLEX® system.

What are the main challenges that innovative medical device companies are facing in Poland?

The main challenge is the amount of money that Poland is spending on healthcare, as innovation costs. The country wants to introduce innovative technologies, without increasing the amount being spent, but the next question is: who will pay for the new products?

Within Poland, there is always a push to lower the price of the product, but not enough is being done to focus on the quality, and really this a determining factor to ensure patients leave hospital faster and in better shape. The great challenge is to portray this message to the key decision marker in the hospital setting.

Nevertheless, these key stakeholders sometimes lack this long-term vision as the political situation means hospital leaders may only be in their role one to two years, and therefore are usually looking at short term goals. We need to change their mindset to understand that higher spending towards innovation in the short-term will save more in the future.

The government has plans to increase public healthcare spending to six-percent of GDP by 2025. Do you feel this is a sustainable figure?

The reason this was set for 2025 is that it represents such a huge investment. If you look at the ageing population, and the conditions that are affecting not only Poland, but all of Europe, in the long-term, six-percent will not be enough, and spending will need to go beyond this point.

What steps can be taken to establish an environment that is commercially viable for companies and also benefit the Polish government?

As aforementioned, quality must be considered more heavily, especially for medical devices as it is not easy to provide clinical data for new innovation. For example, in haemodialysis, we would be required to spend hundreds of millions of dollars for clinical information, with no clear data. Though if you consider quality, it is obvious to observe the positive pharmacoeconomic impact of Baxter products.

This quality factor, as well as Baxter’s ability to fill unmet patient needs, have been key to our success in the Polish market. We are very focused in calculating the economic and medical impact of our products. Our aim is to establish long-term partnerships with hospitals, and not only to assist them from a product perspective, but give them the entire experience, including logistics and distribution, so they can optimise their processes and save money. This, in the end, will allow them to fund more innovation down the line.

The renal area of healthcare is a strong part of Baxter's portfolio. What is the situation for this condition in Poland and how are you looking to help it improve?

We have a two-pronged approach to this area of care; acute affects, mainly in the intensive care unit (ICU) and the chronic conditions in haemodialysis (HD) and peritoneal dialysis (PD). The aim is to target the problem in the early stages, as we witness that the acute condition can become chronic after time.

Statistically, there are twenty-thousand Polish patients on HD and PD therapy, and according to the Polish nephrology society, five-thousand are added to this number ever year. The issue is the patient treatment numbers remain at twenty thousand, as each year five-thousand patients die due to renal failure. Therefore, it is clear we need to improve treatment solutions, and we have introduced HDx Theranova; an innovative technology that removes around 80 percent of toxins during dialysis, more than any other treatment in Poland.

Secondly, we are in close contact with nephrologists and GP's, as early diagnosis is the key step throughout the treatment chain. In fact, the economic burden of poor renal therapy is extremely high. For example, each patient's dialysis last five hours, and is done every third day, so these patients are unable to work at their maximum during this period. Furthermore, if the dialysis does not clean the toxins effectively, these patients struggle to function in society, as they have low energy and are constantly taking antibiotics. Baxter Poland is very active in demonstrating this economic burden as we understand the need for Poland to address this issue head on, and we have the relevant solutions to do so.

How does Baxter Poland act as the leading voice within the sector to increase awareness of the condition?

In Poland, cardiovascular and diabetic care is very well represented, and we want to be the driving force to educate GP's and nephrologists in the renal sector. In the meantime, Baxter Poland will establish an atmosphere of awareness through PR activities, so patients fully understand the condition, which is really a silent killer, due to being extremely difficult to observe at the superficial level.

On a governmental level, we are demonstrating to key members of the Ministry of Health how to optimise healthcare spending to ensure improved and affordable care. This involves building up in-depth health technology assessments, while being more actively visible within governmental talks, to show that you can have more patients on care, and in fact spend less!

Where do you want to lead the company in the next two years?

We are looking for three factors – PAT – performance, accelerate, transform. Performance is to ensure the things we are doing now, we do much better in the future. Accelerate is looking at different options to work on to rapidly expand our reach. Transform, is the transformation of the company, by aligning our business units with our customers of today. Moreover, this entails empowering our staff to make quick decisions on the field with stakeholders.

Long-term, in ten-years, we definitely want to double the revenue of what we are achieving at present, and this will require an annual growth of nine percent, double the market's current growth rate. This will be done by expanding our patient reach and product portfolio within Baxter's therapeutic fields of care.

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