

Interview: Iwona Skrzekowska-Baran - Owner & CEO, Pharm&Med, Poland



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Iwona Skrzekowska-Baran, owner and CEO of Pharm&Med, a young, exciting Polish consultancy that is helping clients to transform evidence, policy insights, and market intelligence into effective market access strategies. She highlights the niche approach of the company to the marketplace, challenges in Polish healthcare and the future aspirations of Pharm&Med as their footprint continues to grow.

You founded Pharm&Med a few months ago. Could you introduce yourself and the company to our international audience?

I have vast experience in the pharmaceutical industry within the sectors of reimbursement, pharmacoeconomic and public affairs. I began my career in the pharmaceutical industry almost twenty-two years ago, when I started to work for Boehringer Ingelheim. I remained there for five-years in a marketing position, though I was eager to move into a field of health technology assessment (HTA), which I was passionate about and thanks to pharmacoeconomics & HTA studies I have developed my knowledge in this field.

After another five-year period at Janssen, I was offered the position of Director of market Access at Novo Nordisk, where I was mainly focusing on their primary therapeutic area of diabetes. After a while, I re-joined Janssen, this time as the Director of market access and corporate affairs, where I have been working for six years.

Now, after nearly 22 years in the pharmaceutical industry, a period that brought me many valuable

experiences, I have decided to take the next step and set up my own consultancy company. I have a PhD in medicine, with the specialisation in the field of pulmonology and paediatrics. I also completed MBA studies in HTA.

What was the key reason behind transitioning from a traditional pharma setting to establishing your own consultancy company?

During my extensive journey throughout different companies and areas of the pharmaceutical industry, I was exposed to high-level management, HTA and the challenges of market access. Personally, I felt it was the right time to contribute my experience and knowledge to the abundance of companies that require such expertise.

The most important skill I have gained during my career is people skills and how to effectively communicate throughout all levels of the pharmaceutical industry. These soft skills are crucial for working with different key stakeholders in the healthcare ecosystem.

Who are the specific clients you are working with and what are the specific services you are offering?

Currently, I am mainly working with different stakeholders who are engaged in health care system in Poland. As my experience was built in the pharmaceutical field, I bring them my expertise and my practical insights on the market.

Above all, Pharm&Med offers market access services. Indeed, Poland does not reimburse innovative drugs to a large extent, and this is a dominant reason why it is important to explain thoroughly the peculiarities of the Polish market to companies. Additionally, Pharm&Med offers further services, such as assistance with communication and public affairs actions, as well as various trainings & courses.

You mentioned the many challenges facing the Polish healthcare ecosystem for your clients. What are the advantages for clients when partnering with Pharm&Med?

Pharm&Med consultancy aims at valuing both perspectives – the internal pharmaceutical side, as well as the view from the external system. We are able to effectively understand our clients' challenges and implement the ideas, since we have the specific knowledge of the industry. This counts more to my clients than merely providing a tremendous amount of analysis, comparison tables or graphs.

What are the most important challenges that your clients are facing today?

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The most challenging for my clients is a difficult & long reimbursement process with many obstacles. The cost effectiveness threshold and impact of innovations towards the healthcare budget impact, are both treated as the necessary conditions for obtaining a positive reimbursement decision. In fact, Poland has one of the most restrictive approaches to the cost

effectiveness threshold even for treatment in oncology in Europe. Nevertheless, Poland is willing to respond to the current reimbursement challenges and ensuring still keeps the value for money approach.

Additionally, the patients' voice in Poland is far too weak in comparison with other European countries, and we must begin taking their views into consideration while making decisions that might affect them.

When we interviewed Marcin Czech, he mentioned the growing importance of pharmacoeconomics, and the think long-term to ensure sustainability. In your expert opinion, what steps is Poland taking to integrate this long-term approach into their processes?

I believe this view of Marcin Czech helps to move towards increasing the transparency of the market access processes and ensuring sustainability. To integrate this approach, among other things, Poland should bring better access to a treatment in rare diseases, an area that is strongly needed by the Polish patients – especially due to the limited threshold of drug prices. Furthermore, Poland will advance its pharmaceutical footprint in the major field of oncology and cardiology and is implementing actions to face the major obstacle for healthcare systems in the future –the ageing population.

However, we must keep in mind that the Polish government allocates only slightly more than four percent of country's GDP to public healthcare, which is much less than other European counterparts. A higher budget is clearly required, so more funds could be allocated to healthcare areas, while equally offering better access to innovative therapies better and faster medical services that Polish patients require.

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How important is using Real World Evidence for these decisions?

It is crucial! As a matter of fact, it is becoming a general tendency in healthcare for governments to pay for therapies based on health outcomes. For this, you should provide figured evidence, have access to registries and to the medical, epidemiological and demographic data. As budgets are under strain and at times the funds seem to never be enough, payment based on health outcomes is crucial – not only for drugs, but also for medical services.

How do you build brand awareness in the Polish consultancy world?

The number of people who have experience in market access in Poland is limited. Therefore, the companies are aware that I have significant experience in this field, mainly due to recommendations from the business. Currently, I am cooperating with few important clients, and it is a very exciting period for my company!

What are your strategic priorities moving forward for the company as you continue to

grow?

It will depend on the development of my future projects in the upcoming months. The aim is to move forward with making the consultancy grow with talented employees. However, I believe the major challenge will be finding the best people possible. While searching for new associates for my company, I will focus on someone with high level of expertise in market access and analytical skills. I care about finding expert staff that would help me with the successful development of the company.

What advice would you give to other people working in Big Pharma who wish to become an entrepreneur like yourself?

That is a difficult question. It depends on personality. It is worth to gain knowledge of the industry, through careful observation and effort in synthesizing the information - not only analysing it. Experience is really important. Last but not least, be strong-minded!

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