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Frank Swaelens, general manager of IQVIA in Belgium and Luxembourg, offers insights into the healthcare and life science ecosystem of Belgium and highlights the opportunities that exist for the country in innovation and digitalization. Swaelens goes on to describe the collaborative role that IQVIA can play as a

human data science company within the Belgian context to capitalize on these trends.

Please begin by introducing yourself and the operations of IQVIA in both Belgium and Luxembourg.

As a Belgian national, I have been managing director of IQVIA in Belgium and Luxembourg since October 2017. I joined the company in 2014 when I sold my technology company, Forcea, to what was IMS Health at the time. Forcea was a small and medium-sized enterprise of about 40 people focused on business intelligence for hospitals. Today, over half of Belgian hospitals are using the data warehouse and Business Intelligence solutions of IQVIA.

It is important to highlight that Belgium is quite an innovative country which is reflected by our operations here. Our mission locally is to partner and innovate to drive healthcare forward. Each year we try to create 10 strategic programs that involve projects to help hospitals, pharma companies, biotech, medtech, and other healthcare stakeholders reach the next level of their

operations. Of the 67,000 employees in IQVIA globally, the Belgian affiliate is a force of 500 team members.

Can you describe to our readers what it means to be positioned as a Human Data Science Company?

The concept of human data science is in fact what makes IQVIA unique. Formed through the merger of IMS Health and Quintiles, IQVIA applies human data science — leveraging the analytic rigour and clarity of data science to the ever-expanding scope of human science — to enable companies to reimagine and develop new approaches to clinical development and commercialization, speed innovation and accelerate improvements in healthcare outcomes

While there are companies doing advanced analytics, managing trials, or generating data, IQVIA tackles all of these activities under one operation. Every time we run a project, we use our data, analytics, technology, and domain expertise, helping customers achieve what is possible and discover better, faster paths to success. This is what we call the IQVIA CORE™- a seamless, dynamic, and constant integration of our capabilities that powers solutions and ideas.

Looking at the Belgian landscape, what do you identify to be the most significant trends impacting the country's healthcare sector?

Not only in Belgium but globally we see that pharma companies are moving their business from primary care, where they worked historically with GPs, to the hospital segments. This is changing the business model of the pharma industry and IQVIA is here to support them in this shift. Additionally, the importance of specialty care and niche markets are increasing. Today with the rise of trends like precision medicine and immune therapies, a drug is made almost as specifically targeted toward a given cohort as if it were developed for a single patient.

We also see the increasing influence of digitalization and e-commerce as patients are buying more healthcare products online. In Belgium specifically, there is a rise of para pharmacies, which are a thousand of square meters in size and sell mostly consumer health products as well as some pharmaceuticals. Between these trends, traditional pharmacies have to re-invent their operations to stay relevant.

In Belgium, there has been a major push to embrace digitalization through eHealth initiatives such as an electronic prescription system. However, stakeholders are critical of the success of these programs as exemplified by the retraction of this mandatory system after only one week of implementation. What is the biggest challenge Belgium faces when embracing digitalization?

In the long run, healthcare will absolutely have to move to digitalization. In my opinion, perhaps the biggest hurdle is that the stakeholders here in Belgium could be overly cautious. Even just looking at e-commerce, we see that Belgium is far behind most countries, but slowly we are catching up which is the same case with eHealth. There are already several apps that have been released by hospitals that are very user-friendly and other initiates will follow. There is simply a change in mindset among all stakeholders that is a necessary first step.

At IQVIA Belux we have the ambition to not only embrace this move to digitalization but also to act as a trend setter and provide our customers with the latest technology. As example I could give you our Digital Sample Management solution. This is an app that allows sales reps to enjoy a fully digital solution for the entire sample management process. This is the first of its kind. It gives all involved visibility to the sample ordering and distribution process and they’re of course prepared for audits of their process compliance.

In 2014 the Ministry of Health initiated an ongoing reorganization of the Belgian hospital landscape and the funding of hospitals. Six years later, what have been the major implications of this program so far?

The main change that has occurred was the regrouping of the approximately 100 hospitals in Belgium into about 25 hospital networks. We are also seeing the beginning of hospitals working together to group some activities. For example, in the past, each hospital had its own maternity ward and today they are trying to figure out whether it is possible to group this activity into a unified operation for a single hospital network. In more complex and niche areas, where a hospital might perform a specific surgery only once or twice a year, the level of quality will never be the same as a single center that strives toward specification and performs the procedure 50 or 100 times. Therefore, the main impact of the restructuring has been the grouping of pathologies to improve quality and efficiency. There are also many ongoing test projects that encourage collaboration from across the healthcare continuum including GPs, pharmacists, and hospitals.

Some small steps have been taken to address the financing mechanism of the healthcare system, but there is still room for much more progress which we can expect to see. Defining budgets and shuffling funding is always a major challenge but is a necessary reform if Belgium aims to keep its generous universal healthcare system intact as it is today.

At the 2020 European Cancer Forum, Minister Maggie de Block highlighted that Belgium has an enormous wealth of digital data, which could help it become a new "mining" country. What is the role that IQVIA can play as a partner in supporting the government to define a clearer data framework and strategy?

To reach such a goal, creating the correct collaboration with a proven track record and domain expertise is crucial. IQVIA has been handling information, data, and advanced analytics for more than 60 years; since 1954 globally and 1968 here in Belgium. We have unmatched expertise on how to gather, protect, secure, manage, code, store and effectively utilize data. Data protection and security are the most important aspects of what we do – without those foundational elements, there is no data utilization.

How would you conclude on Belgium's position to shape the healthcare of tomorrow?

Belgium has a strong biotechnology environment which is evident in university cities like Ghent Leuven, Louvain-la-Neuve and Liège. At the same time, there are many tech companies and start-ups around digital capabilities and AI. This is especially important for biotechs as they do not only want to develop a novel drug but also have a whole ecosystem surrounding it.

As a country, Belgium itself is very innovative. We have a strong education system here with a push to have a creative and entrepreneurial spirit. However, Belgium remains a complex country with many political particularities surrounding our three distinct regions, each of which has its own local government and priorities.

What are the strengths of Belgium that make it so competitive in attracting clinical trials?

About 20 or 30 years ago, the authorities realized that if they made it easy to run regulated clinical trials, those standards could create a competitive advantage for the country. Furthermore, Belgium

has an excellent quality of education with very skilled professionals. For a small country, we have seven university hospitals with many specialists.

The Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB) was established in 1996 – quite early on for the biotech boom. The many startups surrounding this institute helped pique the interest of the Belgian population to study what it takes to work in the pharmaceutical and life science sector, hence the plethora of skilled talent.

Moreover, big pharma has had a longstanding, significant presence here in Belgium for many years. For example, companies such as UCB and Janssen have been operating locally for decades. This direct presence is a major driver of clinical trials in the country, something which the government noticed. Therefore, they created a transparent system to quickly run trials and continue attracting investments.

There are many competitors in the CRO and consulting fields; how does IQVIA differentiate itself?

We have around 400 clients in Belgium and always work for healthcare companies, biotech, hospitals, and the industry – nearly all pharmaceutical companies in the country use our services.

Biotech is a very important sector in the pharmaceutical industry in general and it is very vibrant in Belgium. In 2019, we launched IQVIA Biotech which is dedicated to delivering tailored clinical and commercial solutions for the emerging biotech and biopharma sector. As the needs of big pharma are very different from these companies, through this business unit we can offer simplified operating procedures, specialized teams, and services to provide a more agile way for these innovators to reach their drug development and commercialization milestones.

In addition, we also have expertise in medical device trials; a rising trend caused by the increasing stringency of regulations in the sector.

What does it mean to be a multi-stakeholder partner in healthcare?

IQVIA has always positioned itself to be in the middle of healthcare as a trusted third party among stakeholders. With specialized medicine being the future of healthcare, pharma companies cannot find patients directly which, is just one example of where IQVIA can also be a conjoining collaborator. With our IQVIA CORE™ data and technology, we can work with the industry to help

ensure that the right life-saving treatments can reach patients when they need it most.

What kind of corporate culture do you try to create to motivate your team to be disruptive thinkers?

At IQVIA Belgium we have a director of innovation who helps to drive our goal of setting up the ten strategic programs I previously mentioned. This year we have around 40 projects, most of which do not come from management, but rather from the ideas of our team members on the ground.

What IQVIA needs as a company is to have entrepreneurs. If we want to be innovative, we need people who have the right mentality and ambition to drive ideas forward. We have many people with the entrepreneurial mindset here in the affiliate which is key to our success.

Looking forward, what is your vision for IQVIA Belux for the future?

We need to continue on the path of collaborating with all stakeholders of healthcare. Not to see them as customers or suppliers, but really as partners with whom we can build innovative solutions. The market is changing so quickly and is different today than just a few years ago, making it difficult to identify a linear path for the future. However, as long as we continue to focus on our stakeholders and innovate together with them, we will be able to keep on driving healthcare forward.

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