Fréderic Covemaeker – General Manager, Nordic Pharma Belgium & Luxembourg



I believe Nordic Belgium can be a great role model for other countries on how to successfully leverage a country's assets to bring new products to market

30.03.2020

Tags: Belgium, Nordic, Market Access, Strategy

Fréderic Covemaeker, general manager of Nordic Pharma Belgium, introduces the Belgian affiliate which he established himself in 2008 and elaborates on the next stage of development for operations as Nordic prepares to deliver new solutions to patients in areas with unmet medical needs. Covemaeker also speaks to the challenges faced by SME pharmacos in Belgium, the lack of recognition for the value that incremental innovation brings and the opportunities he sees to become a trusted partner to patients, professionals, and the healthcare authorities.

Please introduce yourself and the scope and scale of Nordic Pharma's operations here in Belgium.

I started the affiliate here in Belgium from scratch 12years ago with only one medical device product. Being able to build a new entity locally with the support of a centralized European Nordic Group operation was an exciting challenge for me to embark on. At the time, Nordic was primarily focused on in-licensing products so it was a major advantage to have some autonomy to bring in opportunities in addition to the group's portfolio, and in a way, be entrepreneurial in creating the Belgian business.

This unique situation is one of the reasons why talent stays within Nordic for quite a long time. Some of my colleagues who joined shortly after me are still with the company today. This affiliate is

a product of our hard work and development in the market – we are proud of what we have accomplished and are dedicated to the success of Nordic Pharma in Belgium.

From infancy through adolescence and finally overcoming the growing pains of a new organization, we have entered a new era for Nordic Belgium. Going into 2020 we are ready to have a more complete operational platform and shift into high gear.

What priorities have you set for the affiliate as we move further into 2020?

My top priority is to supplement this development of the affiliate with new product launches that are aligned with the ambitions of our group strategy. Nordic has set its focus on three key therapeutic areas which are gynaecology, rheumatology, and critical pain. In particular, our first ambition will be to gain reimbursement for our rheumatology portfolio which has been already introduced in most European markets.

Last year, Nordic Pharma merged with Amring Pharma which has been quite a change for the group. We are now not only European focused but have presence worldwide as a globally active company. What has also changed is our strategy, evolving from an in-licensing approach to a greater emphasis on self-developed products such as our European flagship Nordimet.

How is the Nordic Pharma group’s portfolio offering reflected at the local Belgian level?

In Belgium, we have historically been the most focused on gynaecology followed by critical care which mainly consists of anaesthesia. The market position we have carved out for Nordic locally is a good example of the flexibility which came with our in-licensing strategy as we started the affiliate in spinal anesthesiology which was not a central pillar of the Nordic group outside of the country. Today, there are synergies between this portfolio and our proprietary products as Trasylol in cardio anaesthesia. This is a good case study of how our local in-licensing deals have helped to pave the way for our self-developed portfolio.

At the moment, our business is split 50/50 between gynaecology and anaesthesia. As I mentioned, we will continue our focus on market access and reimbursement in these areas, but also for introducing Nordimet which will create our rheumatology offering in Belgium.

What has been your experience with the market access conditions of Belgium?

As a country, Belgium has a good healthcare system. However, in regard to market access and especially reimbursement we face a complex challenge. In the market things take time and this is exemplified by the eight years it took to bring one of our rare disease products to the market. We are currently facing the same hurdle in gaining reimbursement for Nordimet.

The Belgian health authorities are dealing with market access under silo thinking; looking at medicines on a one-to-one basis of what is the cost and what is the reimbursement. However, there is not a globalist approach that takes into account the social context or savings potential. This goes beyond just considering how innovative a molecule is, but rather thinking about how a molecule can be given new life or the value of a new delivery mechanism. Nordimet Autoinjector is a perfect example of this. The first button-free, once-weekly pen methotrexate device offers patients a new means of administering treatment that ensures ease, comfort, and dosage confidence; greatly improving the quality of their life and disease management. However, at this stage, the autoinjector pen is not yet valued by Belgian authorities because they focus at the molecule of products.

In rheumatology, there is clearly a direct shift to the higher-priced biologicals rather than looking at all the options of the cornerstone of the first treatment which can create savings such as self-injectables that give patients an independent way of managing their disease. Still, this challenge also means there is an opportunity for the future to engage in conversations between the authorities and SMEs like Nordic.

As a relatively new player to the market – only coming just over one decade ago – how do you go about creating these conversations and communicating the Nordic Pharma brand to healthcare stakeholders in the country?

While market access efforts are important, establishing trust with stakeholders is essential. In the industry, we see that management is constantly changing over short periods of time. However, in an organization like Nordic Pharma where we have been dedicated since day one, we have been able to build a network and strong relationships with KOLs, patient associations, and other stakeholders who didn’t even know who we were a few years ago. Therefore, we will continue to build our name and presence in the market and gradually reach more and more to the authorities.

As Nordic Pharma, we can play a role in representing SMEs and perhaps enter into pilot projects with the government in a way they cannot do with Big Pharma. This is how we hope to build a 360° network with all stakeholders to demonstrate that we are not just focused on products but rather the value we can bring to patients. For this reason, last year I entered as an active member of the SME-10 group within Pharma.be. Even within the association, we see increasing recognition of the role that these companies can play in the pharma market.

What added value can Nordic Pharma's products bring to the Belgian healthcare system?

Trasylol, for example, is a life-saving product for high-risk patients undergoing cardiac surgery. This product fulfils an important medical need as it targets a niche patient group, save blood – an issue in Belgium as donations are always below the need – and limit the risk of perfusion. Trasylol is also a solution to reduce the costs that come with all these complications. Bigger companies are often not interested in these very complex and strictly regulated small market areas even though it makes a major difference for patients and professionals.

With Nordimet, we are also convinced about the added value of this device which is a delivery breakthrough for patients. Just like diabetes patients rheumatoid arthritis patients can self-administer their treatments safely and comfortably without excessive doctor or nurse visits. The mechanism leads to improved quality of care, which is very important to patients, but authorities typically look at the direct cost of the molecule in itself.

To what extent is Belgium a strategic country for Nordic Pharma?

It is absolutely significant. In Belgium, we have built close connections with patient organizations and KOLs which is truly characteristic of the market. Our market access team is involved internationally and for all EU products that Nordic launches, we have Belgian participants within European advisory boards. Due to the country's expertise, strong academic research environment and highly skilled medical professionals, Belgium has a significant international recognition in international symposiums and conversations.

As we saw with our anaesthetic portfolio, the way we had been able to build connections with the medical community was a major asset for the successful launch of Trasylol. Therefore, I believe Nordic Belgium can be a great role model for other countries on how to successfully leverage a

country’s assets to bring new products to market.

Having first set up the affiliate more than ten years ago, how satisfied are you with where Nordic Pharma stands today?

Personally, I am quite happy with the platform we have created from scratch. We are a pharma company with a focus particularly in the hospital segment which cannot be compared to OTC or retail. We have successfully moved past our development phases and are now more mature to bring new products in the market. Also, at a corporate level, the change in vision to operate worldwide with the acquisition of Amring Pharmaceuticals is quite exciting. With a new CEO and strategy to leverage self-developed products, things are moving quickly within Nordic.

What is the uniqueness of Nordic Pharma within the Belgian pharma ecosystem?

At Nordic, our people have the opportunity to evolve with the company and centrally develop their careers. Comparing to the bigger pharma companies where new employees are often restricted to their specific domain of regulatory, product management, sales, etc. we in Nordic have a hands-on role throughout the company and are able to experience all sides of the business. Especially for fresh young talent this an excellent opportunity in career development.

Another of our values here in Nordic is transparency, both internally with colleagues and externally with stakeholders. As a team, I highly value communication within the organization to showcase how things are happening which results in faster outcomes of our work.

What do you want Belgian healthcare stakeholders to think when they hear the name Nordic Pharma?

I want stakeholders to see Nordic Pharma as a partner and point of trust in the industry. We have a proven track record for bringing affordable solutions to patients in unmet medical needs. With Nordic, there is no high level of bureaucracy When stakeholders engage with us, they are speaking directly with people who are passionate about what we do and dedicated to building long term relationships. Lastly, I hope that our mission to bring new life to products which improve the quality of life is well recognized.

See more interviews