Veronique Walsh – General Manager, Bristol Myers Squibb Benelux

We want to combine the agility of a biotech with the experience of a Big Pharma company

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Veronique Walsh, General Manager of Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS) – Benelux, explains her ambition to build a new company culture following the acquisition of Celgene. Walsh also lays bare the prospects for bringing innovation to Belgian patients and explains how BMS continues to deliver on its promise of transforming lives through science amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before taking your current role, your career path has been diverse, starting out as a medical doctor. How has your career evolved and brought you to your current role here in Belgium?

Indeed, my career began on a very different trajectory. I started out as a medical doctor, initially working as a general practitioner, then I spent a period as a hospital doctor with a speciality in toxicology. I wanted to see how I could have more impact on patients, perhaps even to stop them from getting sick at all. Having completed an MBA to better understand the industry, I spent over 20 years working in the field of vaccines.

Over the course of my career, it became clear that policymakers were taking an increased role in healthcare decision-making at a national level. Because of this, I decided to undertake a postgraduate certificate in health economics from the University of York.

While I am originally French, I have spent the majority of my career working in the United Kingdom. In my previous role, I acted as General Manager for the UK and Ireland market. This was at a particularly interesting time as we were preparing for Brexit.

Now, I have responsibility for the Benelux region: Belgium, the Netherlands & Luxembourg. I have been very impressed not only by the complexity of the Belgian healthcare system but also the determination to bring effective healthcare to patients.

What was the main mandate handed to you when you took your new position, and how can you achieve this in the Benelux region where the dynamics of each individual market can be very different?

Managing the Benelux region is particularly challenging given that Belgium and the Netherlands have very different cultures with contrasting healthcare systems.

Fortunately, I am leading a team of talented professionals with a strong understanding of the countries, The efforts of my team are contributing not only to BMS but also to the industry as a whole, sharing our knowledge to help accelerate innovation which is the main mission of BMS.

My main mandate has been to ensure we build one unified company, following the integration of Celgene. Celgene possessed very strong human capital and pipeline. It is my goal to create a new corporate culture that works for everyone. I am encouraged by the fact that the underlying values in both companies were very similar from the outset. Both are committed to delivering innovation, although focused on different therapy areas. This ensures that we can work together to accelerate patient access to innovation here in Belgium, in Luxembourg and in the Netherlands.

Of course, this process has been hampered by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Not only do we need to deliver this unique corporate culture, but simultaneously ensure that we deliver for patients in a way which is safe for our workforce and is respectful to the healthcare professionals with whom we work. They are under so much pressure. It is critical to respect their workload and reduce risks for them and their patients.

What do you see as the main advantages and challenges that this new corporate culture will bring for patients?

A direct impact for patients is that we will be considering new therapeutic approaches, with researchers working together and generating new ideas. Take the example of CAR-T, an innovative type of immunotherapy predominantly used in haematology. Now, the question is: can we apply this technology to other types of tumours?

There are different levels where integration can make a difference, from research to clinical trials, and then to market access. When it comes to medicines, beginning treatment early, even one month, can make a huge difference for patients, which is why accelerating access is key.

One of BMS's global R&D centres in Europe is located in Belgium. How does this reflect Belgium's strength in R&D and clinical trials?

Belgium is known as the Pharma Valley of Europe. If you measure an industry's stature by its R&D investments, then Belgium's (bio)pharmaceutical industry is best in class. While the country represents only 2.2 percent of the EU's population, it lays claim to 12.5 percent of pharmaceutical investments made in the EU. Among all EU member states, Belgium is the number one in pharmaceutical R&D investments per inhabitant. With a total of EUR 3.6 billion in 2018, (bio)pharmaceutical companies invested nearly EUR 10 million per day.

Our R&D organization is composed of industry-leading researchers and drug developers who have a passion for science, a curiosity for discovery and a commitment to translating these advances into medicines that make a difference for patients. Supported by robust capabilities, unmatched collective experience and a strong, global and local Belgian presence, we are advancing science through internally discovered medicines as well as external partnerships. BMS heavily invests in R&D in Belgium and from Belgium to the world. The group decided to locate in Belgium one of its worldwide R&D hubs.

Every day, in Braine l'Alleud, more than 180 colleagues are working tirelessly in R&D and related departments, on biostatistics, on clinical supplies operations, on the global roll-out of clinical trials and on the development of new treatments, a highly impressive amount. Belgium is also the home of the European regulatory sciences unit, with a strategic link to our EMA in Amsterdam.

Coming from the UK, how would you assess the Belgian system's willingness to welcome innovation?

The agreement between the industry and the Minister of Health Maggie De Block called *Pact of the Future* accelerated access to innovative treatments such as immuno-oncology.

BMS pioneered immunotherapy, a class of medicines that harnesses the power of the immune system to treat cancer. We brought the first two IO molecules to patients in Belgium with Ipilimumab and Nivolumab, commercialized under the brand names of Yervoy and Opdivo, respectively. I am immensely proud of this achievement. An agreement signed with the Belgian authorities secured the reimbursement of all indications of Opdivo immediately after the European Commission's approval. This has made a huge difference for patients and is a clear example of Belgium's strengths in delivering access to innovation,

On the other hand, the environment is changing. There is a degree of political uncertainty adding a new layer of constraints for health economies around the world – a worldwide phenomenon. The main question that I would like clarity on from the authorities is how we can continue to focus on innovation for therapies that are meaningful for patients and understand the priorities for the government in a post-COVID-19 world.

You have mentioned your current portfolio in oncology and praised the pipeline acquired through Celgene. Could you tell us more about your existing portfolio in Belgium?

We focus on innovations that drive meaningful change in oncology, haematology, immunology and cardiovascular disease. Our focus on patients and their families motivates us to work smarter, faster and better. BMS is committed to making cure a possibility for all cancer patients.

OPDIVO® was approved in Europe in 2017 and is now undergoing trials to assess its suitability against other forms of cancer. How would you assess the trajectory of OPDIVO® in Belgium compared with other markets? And is Belgium part of those global clinical trials?

We have achieved a transformation in the treatment of early and advanced solid tumours with Nivolumab and Ipilimumab, either alone or in combination.

Advances like these have changed survival expectations for patients.

For example, in melanoma, until a decade ago, patients diagnosed with an advanced form had a very poor prognosis and treatments offered little hope. Two-year survival was 14 percent and five-year survival was virtually out of reach.

Belgium is part of those clinical trials applying existing immuno-oncology treatments to different types of cancer. Phase I, II, and III trials are currently ongoing here.

Looking beyond 2020, what are the potential future treatments in development that excite you most and you would like to ensure can reach patients in Benelux?

I am particularly excited by the potential of CAR-T and the benefit that we can bring with our advancements in this field of highly personalised medicine. During my medical degree, such treatments were considered ‘science fiction’. I lost my sister to a disease that would today be treatable through this type of treatments, so I take it personally and am very passionate about progressing treatments that can save patients and impact their whole families.

Given that we are in a time of great uncertainty, with normal working procedures becoming more difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic how have you managed and supported your employees and stakeholders throughout this crisis?

Our employees understand that they are contributing to our mission of assisting patients with unmet medical needs and who require continuity of treatments.

We were able to adapt quickly to remote working, using virtual meetings.

I believe that in the future we will be able to combine these virtual discussions with personal interactions to form a new relationship between our employees and the medical doctors. Face to face interactions will still remain essential so that we can understand the needs of our customers, but we will be able to utilise the virtual conditions for added speed and efficiency in some tasks.

We are working with researchers, the biotech community, and the broader life sciences industry on ways we together can accelerate therapies for COVID-19. Among other efforts, we have identified approximately 1,000 compounds in our discovery library that we are making available to collaborators for screening for potential molecules to treat COVID-19. We are evaluating certain medicines in our portfolio that could be included in near-term clinical trials with a focus on agents that may have an impact on the inflammatory immune response associated with COVID-19. This

research may advance as either company-sponsored or investigator-sponsored trials under the leadership of a cross-functional team focused on advancing this science with a sense of urgency. We are also participating in several cross-industry groups designed to foster collaboration and ensure that we are not duplicating research (e.g. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation)

What are your overall thoughts about this pandemic we are living through?

In this pandemic, I have been impressed by how quickly the public has been able to adapt to the difficulties of the situation and how disciplined and resilient they have been in adhering to the restrictions. We have asked people to reduce their freedoms which would have been unimaginable before.

I also have been impressed by the clear willingness for collaboration to bring solutions. I can see previous pharmaceutical competitors collaborating and synergy between academia, healthcare professionals and industry. Together we can find a faster and better solution for the developed and developing world.

As someone who began their career as a medical doctor, what advice would you offer to those considering a move into pharma?

The pharma industry offers so many options in terms of career choices. This is not only for medical doctors like me. If you are interested in science, there is a role for you. This is not limited to pharmacists or doctors: there are biotechnicians, immunologists, toxicologists and biostatisticians transitioning into the industry to give only a few examples. Even specialists in non-scientific areas such as communications and human resources are in high demand. What is important is that inner determination to make a difference. Often the pharma industry is depicted in a negative way, but from my perspective, I see an industry that wants to help and bring science to people.

What would you like your colleagues to keep in mind about BMS in Belgium?

We are one of the major companies in Belgium, and our clear ambition is to transform lives through science. We want to combine the agility of a biotech with the experience of a Big Pharma company. This is for the wider goal of creating a leading biopharma company focusing on all the modern elements of science, from developing medicine to improving how we collect and apply data. We

want to bring the human touch to every treatment we provide. This is why I am so proud to work at BMS. My goal is to deliver this new corporate culture and that level of energy across our operations.

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