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Denis Vujić, managing director of MSD Poland, discusses his overriding mission to give Polish patients greater access to breakthrough therapies and highlights the affiliate's extensive R&D capabilities that entail both domestic and global operations. Furthermore, he highlights the important steps that MSD is undertaking to strengthen its position as the premier partner of choice for all key stakeholders involved in the Polish healthcare ecosystem and his future aspirations as he grows into his role.

As the recently appointed managing director of MSD Poland, what are your main objectives since taking up the role?

I have been the managing director since June 2017 and from a private point of view, I am loving the country! From a business perspective, my main goal is to live the mission of MSD, which is simple: to save and improve the lives of Polish patients.

In the last couple of years Polish patients have been able to receive some of the company's most innovative treatments, with the decision of the Polish government to reimburse products concerning melanoma and HCV. Our team must continue to drive forward our life-changing drugs, and our new objective is to have Keytruda®, a highly innovative lung cancer treatment, placed on the reimbursement list as it is already in many other European countries. Data published recently in Yokohama at the 18th world conference for lung cancer show that Keytruda® more than doubled the median overall survival compared to chemotherapy after two years of follow up in first line treatment of patients with NSCLC and with high levels of PD-L1. That is impressive!

What are the key factors that have led to the affiliate's impressive growth?

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The reimbursement of the melanoma and HCV products have largely supported our dynamic growth. However, there is potential for faster growth with other treatments gaining market access, such as in our diabetes portfolio. Nevertheless, Poland is a market in a constant positive evolution and where

the ease of doing business is also getting better, and the acceptance of our innovation goes hand-in-hand with the company's push to invest in Poland.

MSD Poland is directing its efforts to incite this change and promote innovation further. Currently, 4.6 percent of GDP is spent on public healthcare and this is supposed to increase to 6 percent by 2025; therefore, this should open the doors to more innovative treatments gaining reimbursement and being delivered to patients.

What strategies have you utilized to navigate the healthcare ecosystem and gain market access?

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We have followed the natural reimbursement process and the discussions we have encountered are based upon optimising treatment and improving product availability. We believe it requires a joint effort and partnership between the industry and the payers. MSD aims to be the partner of choice in finding the most sustainable solutions in the long-term for both the pharmaceutical market and the national health fund so in the end patients can receive world-class care.

Another point to highlight is the 2012 Reimbursement Act that gave the opportunity for companies to utilize risk sharing agreements; this is an important step forward. At the moment, the funds generated from these agreements are placed within the general healthcare budget. We would like this money to only contribute towards market entry of innovative therapies as innovators are the ones supplying the funds. This would create a sustainable system for the payers and promote breakthrough therapies being received by patients – a win-win for the Polish patients, the government and the industry.

What role does MSD Poland play in driving forward Polish R&D?

Poland, being the 20th largest economy and pharmaceutical market globally, will always be a key part of MSD's worldwide operations and the new government's incentives to increase R&D to a greater extent is facilitating the country's move towards innovation.

As the premier research based company in the world, we are strongly committed to remain at the forefront of the Polish innovative landscape. MSD Poland has currently 570 employees with around 350 people working in R&D. Around 260 of them are employed in one of the company's four global Data Management Centres based in Warsaw, which is composed of two different branches – clinical trials support and pharmacovigilance. An additional staff of around 90 people are part of our Global Clinical Trials Operations (GCTO). This huge investment clearly shows the great and strategic importance MSD Poland plays for the company's global R&D ambitions.

What is the current scope of clinical trials being conducted by MSD Poland?

We have currently around 60 clinical trials ongoing in Poland. Most importantly, research facilities we work with are world-class and obviously meet the required FDA and EMA standards. The country's fantastic pool of researchers has allowed us to constantly grow our GCTO team.

Nevertheless, there is huge room for improvement in Poland for clinical trials. The government might look at breaking down some of the administrative barriers that impede the speed of trial commencement, an important factor in global companies deciding where to position a clinical trial.

How is MSD an active voice among the healthcare community in Poland?

It all boils down to MSD being the leading partner of all the stakeholders involved in the healthcare ecosystem. In oncology, we have a highly innovative treatment in melanoma and lung cancer. For HCV we are actively seeking solutions with the scientific community, public payer and patient groups as it is a disease that affects some 100 thousand Poles.

What are your aspirations moving forward?

We have two priorities in the future. First, we want to continue driving the affiliate's growth by introducing further breakthrough therapies such as Keytruda®, allowing Polish patients to access true innovation – this time by reimbursement in first line Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer treatment.

Secondly, I want to establish MSD Poland as the number one place to work for young Poles that want to build a career in the pharmaceutical industry. We are promoting diversity and gender equality through initiatives, such as our MSD Women's Network. We have great female balance in our workforce: women make up 70 percent of our staff, 59 percent of our middle management and 50 percent of our higher management team. Furthermore, 60 percent of our employees are millennials. These factors, coupled with our ability to retain and attract talent, will drive forward MSD Poland's ambition to be the premier partner of choice for Polish patients, doctors and payers.

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