

Interview: Marija Krstic – General Manager, GSK Serbia and Montenegro



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Marija Krstic,

general manager of GSK Serbia and Montenegro, discusses how the various positions she has undertaken during her 13-year career at GSK help inform her current role, the initiatives that GSK Serbia is involved in to increase access to innovative medicines for Serbian patients, and her push to ensure that GSK remains a trusted partner – not only to patients – but to the industry and other key stakeholders.

Can you tell us about your journey through GSK and what your key objectives have been while working here?

Since the beginning of my journey in GSK, I had the chance to deal with sales, marketing, market access, and have been involved with pricing, even logistics. This gave me a 360 degree view of operations and a wealth of experience. It wasn't upward movement, it was horizontal, and it got me to the top. Gaining this further understanding and skills, as well as knowledge and experience is helping me a lot in my current position, and it is very beneficial and useful to run the business.

If you are an ambitious person seeking new experiences, lifelong lessons, and knowledge, GSK is the perfect place to get that know-how. Being a part of an international company and in a small market, you must be able to multitask, be flexible and quickly adapt to changes, as well as seize opportunities – otherwise, success is not possible. Operating in a small market implies that there is a limitation in resources, and still there are significant achievements of our team that make the difference for the local community and patients' quality of life.

What are the key milestones you have achieved on patient care and CSR?

Patient-centricity is at the heart of everything we do and every decision we make. We, at GSK, truly live our values and we are really proud of it.

I would also like to stress the partnership we have with the wider community. We take pride in the CSR initiatives we have. It is again showing the way that we are operating – it is not only about *what* we do but *how* we do it.

Some of our efforts include – Positive Partnership – aiming to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV, working with UNICEF dedicated to improving health of the Roma children in Serbia. I am also very proud of GSK – Save the Children – global partnership, the goal of which is to help save one million children's lives. In Serbia, we recognized the opportunity that global partnership offers, establishing local collaboration with – Save the Children –, to support the Serbian Government's efforts during the refugee crisis. Within the partnership a – Mother and Baby Corner – and – Children's Corner – were established within a refugee center in Belgrade as a safe place that provides support to the most vulnerable people within migrant families seeking shelter in Serbia. Beside our financial support, I am especially proud of our employees' volunteering in the refugee center since we all believe that our success is in what we give – and this is what makes us who we are.

What about on a business level?

We are performing successfully and delivering sustainable growth despite the challenges we are facing. In Serbia we are present in several therapeutic areas as the industry leader in bringing innovative therapies for respiratory patients, as well as in improving access to novel HIV therapies to align local treatment approaches to European guidance. Another major area of our business is prevention where we are a global leader – with a significant pediatric and adult vaccines portfolio. In Serbia, we are also present in other therapy areas such as CNS, antibiotics, and recently lupus and pulmonary hypertension.

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Our top priority is to ensure access to innovative medicine to all patients in need. Having this in mind, and taking into consideration our country's budget constraints on one side and patients' unmet needs on the other, we invest our efforts in adjusting the prices of our medicines through our flexible pricing strategy.

Over the past decade we have challenged the traditional industry model by being the first company to increase transparency around clinical trial data, being the first to declare support to patient organizations, and being the first to abolish individual sales targets for medical representatives. We work hard to ensure that those who prescribe our products have all the necessary information to be able to put patients' interests first, therefore, we have changed our business model to support the improvement of the healthcare environment and we strongly support initiatives of the industry towards greater transparency. It is therefore very important that these relationships are based on trust.

In 2015 the EFPIA (European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations) adopted a new Disclosure Code as transparency has been an area of public interest in recent years. In accordance with the Code, all EFPIA member companies, including INOVIA member companies in Serbia, agreed to disclose transfers of value made to healthcare organizations and healthcare professionals on individual basis. In Serbia, I am proud that GSK is the only company that achieved individual named disclosure of 100 percent of transfer of value data. This way we demonstrate in

practice that GSK supports the Code wholeheartedly, because it is the right thing to do and is consistent with our values of integrity, transparency, patient first and respect.

In November 2016, GSK ranked first in the Access to Medicine Index for the fifth consecutive time. What are the market access dynamics in Serbia, and what can be done to further access to medicines for Serbian patients?

Whilst we are being recognized for what we do practically to help â?? last year, we ranked first in the Access to Medicine Index for the fifth consecutive time and we also topped Fortuneâ??s Change the World list â?? this independent external recognition comes not just as result of what we do, but also how we do it.

In Serbia, after a few years of very limited access for innovative treatments, 2016 was the year that we saw new innovative drugs added to the reimbursement list. GSK was one of the most successful companies: in 2016 four new GSK respiratory and HIV drugs were included in the drug reimbursement list.

This year, two more drugs, respiratory and HIV, were reimbursed by applying the same tailored-pricing strategy: by working together with our HQ and the government for better patient care. Nevertheless, there are still important areas for improvement when it comes to patient treatment. Innovation should be recognized through patient outcome rather than new â??more expensiveâ?? treatments. We can see positive signals from Health Insurance Fund that show it to be more responsive to patientsâ?? needs and understanding the improvement that a partnership of all stakeholders can bring to the healthcare system â?? from government, civil society to pharmaceutical companies. Regardless of outcomes, the emergence of dialogue is an enormous improvement.

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GSK not only leads in medicine access but also led the first Access to Vaccines Index in 2017. How do you ensure the access to vaccines for the Serbian patients, especially with such strong anti-vaccine lobby present in Serbia?

Vaccines in Serbia are well developed and there is a strong awareness for the immunization. And this is underpinned with clearly determined government position and efforts invested in supporting the immunization. Last year the government adopted a new law on infectious diseases which led to the introduction of new vaccines in the national immunization program. It is a huge step forward and clear indicator that Serbia is moving towards modernizing the immunization calendar which brings us closer to the developed European countries. It is true that the anti-vaccinal lobby affects the community very strongly. As living in the digital era brings positive changes in terms of access to information there is a rising need for critical thinking to be applied especially when it comes to such an important topic like public health is. We strongly believe that education of parents is crucial to increasing the awareness of consequences of avoiding preventive measures, that can affect health of entire population

One of the GSK initiatives focuses on educating the community and raising awareness, especially to young parents. We support the â??Baby packageâ?? shared by the City of Belgrade to young mothers, mainly through educational materials about prevention of diseases.

Approximately 1,000 Serbian citizens are not aware that they are HIV positive. GSK is working with experts all around the globe to find the cure for HIV/AIDS. What can Serbia do to raise awareness about this critical issue?

Regarding HIV initiatives, GSK involves all relevant stakeholders, and focuses on long-term projects. Last year we partnered with The Institute for Public Health of Serbia (IPHS) and the Institute for Students Healthcare of Belgrade (ISHB) in driving national HIV awareness campaign, launched at the Belgrade Fashion, with aim to educate public on HIV prevention and encourage people to get HIV test. During the campaign a free voluntary counseling and testing within mobile medical units was available for our citizens in more than 25 cities and towns throughout Serbia. This campaign was recognized with a European Reed Ribbon Award in category of challenges mindset, among 800 different projects from all over Europe.

Another proud moment was when we partnered with The City of Belgrade, IPHS, and ISHB within this year's European HIV testing week: while taking a tramway ride through the centre of the city, all interested citizens could receive voluntary counselling and testing on HIV. The branded tramway took passengers every day during a week from five specified stations in the centre of the city. Those willing to get tested were able to do it while taking a ride in the tram, with fast HIV test, and to get the results in only 20 minutes.

We have noticed an increase in the number of people tested year on year. This was a great initiative, and we are thinking already what to do in 2018.

Focusing on Serbia, can you give us an overview of the scope of the Serbian operations of GSK?

We have been very successful for the past few years, and this year is no exception. I believe it is a matter of continuity, to push through the changes in the environment while maintaining the course for a long term vision. With new innovative drugs, fresh opportunities on the horizon such as partnerships, we will help more patients – we are excited about the future.

All core therapy areas align with GSK's focus. Firstly respiratory, where we had two new drugs on the reimbursement list last year and one this year that we will launch in 2018. Regarding HIV, last year and this year two new drugs were listed, and with the changes in the immunization calendar and the new PCV vaccine introduced, we are very happy that we will be able to participate at the tender that is expected to be announced in the first quarter in 2018.

What do you wish to have achieved in the next five years?

Looking at the GSK pipeline, having access to medicines is our highest priority, and we see more opportunities for GSK to bring new medicines for the patients in Serbia. On the other hand, I see the opportunity for growth in new ventures, such as our agreement with Amicus, based on which they are promoting GSK's antibiotics for oral use in Serbia. I truly believe that the greatest success we achieve rely on partnerships and trust.

How do you want our international readership to perceive GSK Serbia?

GSK Serbia is a real example that proves success is possible when your team is engaged, highly motivated and nurture true (GSK) values. When you operate in a less predictable market and you are faced with uncertainty, you need to be aware of market dynamics and be very adaptable and quick-witted. The latest employee survey revealed that Serbia has 99 percent engagement index, for which we are very proud. Our team highlighted that they are empowered, inspired, and motivated to work at GSK. I want the whole world to see that GSK Serbia have done their best in bringing the solutions and products to the Serbian patient, and we will continue the same way in the future.

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