

Sabena Solomon – General Manager, GSK Belgium, the Netherlands & Luxembourg



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Sabena Solomon, general manager of GSK Benelux, speaks about her first impressions of the Belgium market, having come from GSK Finland, and her initial priorities for leading the affiliate. Solomon goes on to explain GSK's continued commitment to ensuring patients have access to innovative medicines, the role the company plays within the Belgium healthcare ecosystem, and the future opportunities she sees for continued partnership with local authorities.

What were the local attributes of the Belgian healthcare and life sciences ecosystem that stood out most to you when you came to the country last October?

I have been working with GSK for 21 years in various guises and areas. What stood out for me in Belgium was the collaborative approach between healthcare providers and other stakeholders when it comes to working together to ensure patients get access to the medicines they need. This collaborative approach is essential to move forward together with the right partnership to ensure the best healthcare outcomes possible, which means patients have fast access to the right medicines, particularly innovative medicines, that they need. This openness of communication is something I really appreciate in Belgium.

What have you identified as your priorities since taking over the affiliate half a year ago?

One of the things I am proud of in GSK is our very clear purpose – to help people do more, feel better and live longer. As general manager, my role is to work closely with the management team and the entire organisation to accomplish this mission in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Therefore, my priorities in 2020 are focused on innovation, performance and trust, all within the right culture.

Innovation refers to our responsibility to work with healthcare providers to deliver access to our pipeline of new products, that our R&D colleagues have developed, to the patients who need them. Ensuring our business performs well is essential for our capacity to reinvest into the healthcare system, ensuring a sustainable business presence in the long term. Finally, maintaining trusted relationships with our government and medical community partners, plus ensuring that we continue to have the trust of the patients who rely on our medicines, is fundamental to everything we do and forms a vital part of GSK's commitment to Belgium.

Underpinning these three priority areas is our culture. At GSK, everything we do centres around our values of patient focus, transparency, respect and integrity. This is incredibly important to me. My focus is on continuing to foster a culture where we live these values every day and where we work as a team, with courage and accountability, so we can deliver extraordinary things for our patients and make GSK a brilliant place to work.

I encourage our employees to put our values at the heart of every decision they make through strong leadership, offering individual development opportunities and rewarding employees for how they work, as well as what they achieve. I want everyone at GSK to feel proud of the work we do, the company we work for, and the difference we make together.

How important is the internal GSK culture, in a country like Belgium which has a diverse cultural dynamic?

Throughout GSK, not just in Belgium, our culture is central to everything we do. For me, one element of this is having a singular vision focused on outcomes. What I always say to my team is – "What can we achieve?", not "What we can get done?". I want our team to feel like we are always focused on achieving the right thing for patients in the right way. You mentioned cultural diversity and I just want to pick up on that point – while our vision is very singular, it is the diversity of our employees, the variety of backgrounds, perspectives and experience that helps us to be successful. This is something we embrace and actively value.

Aside from vaccines, GSK also markets consumer health products and pharmaceuticals in key therapeutic areas such as respiratory, HIV, immunology, and oncology. Can you walk us through GSK's portfolio in Belgium and the balance of these business units?

As GSK we have a wide range of activities here in Belgium. Of course, we have our vaccine business, which is a global operation managed separately from the affiliate. What I look after in the country – and in the Netherlands and Luxembourg – is the overall commercial operations for vaccine and pharmaceutical products. In Belgium, we also have ViiV Healthcare, which has a great heritage in the country, and our consumer healthcare business. This structure of three separate business units allows us to have the right resource and focus on our products in these different areas.

Focusing on our pharmaceuticals and vaccine portfolio, GSK has a very strong heritage in respiratory care, especially in asthma, severe asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). From our first bronchodilator over 50 years ago, to our most recent respiratory medicines, including our inhaler portfolio, and an injectable biologic treatment, we are continuing to deliver new solutions to Belgian patients. We also have innovative products in other specialty areas, to maintain a comprehensive offer to patients.

As the leading company for vaccines we have more than 20 vaccines available to patients in Belgium; a majority of which have been discovered, developed and produced locally. Our current vaccines portfolio covers every stage of life, from infants to adolescents, adults, pregnant women, travellers and the elderly. From our first vaccine, which was developed for polio in 1956, up until our recent meningococcal vaccine, our history has been driven by innovation.

Our third area of focus is oncology. As a company, we have a pipeline of what we believe are potentially transformational medicines for people with cancer that we are developing through a new approach to R&D related to the immune system, the use of genetics and advanced technologies.

In our conversation with Minister of Health Maggie De Block, she spoke about the potential of Belgium to be a frontrunner in the area of health data. In your view, what opportunities could this create for the industry of achieving what many consider to be the next frontier of healthcare – a value-based system?

There are many definitions of what value-based healthcare could be, but as we move forward, this new approach can only become more important. If this is going to create faster access and improved health outcomes for patients, such a system will be extremely critical in the future paradigm of healthcare. At GSK, we are investing in scientific and technical excellence to develop and launch new innovative medicines that meet the needs of patients and payers. Looking at our R&D, we are already working with genetic partners like 23&Me to improve our efficiencies through personalized medicine and certainly exploring new ways of working when it comes to unlocking the potential of data.

We are also considering how we can work with real-world evidence. Randomised controlled trials are the gold standard in evidence-based medicine. Real-world evidence will not replace these but can provide complementary information that can help decision-makers assess the value and impact of a medicine on healthcare systems. Having the breadth of information from real-world evidence would allow us to really evaluate what the outcomes are for patients using our products.

What objectives are you hoping to accomplish during your tenure as the general manager of GSK Benelux?

There are a few aspects that are vital for GSK's objectives. First, we must continue to build opportunities to work with our partners in reaching a new agreement similar to the Pact of the Future. It is essential that we create a dialogue with the authorities and healthcare community to work closely together to ensure innovative medicines are accessible to patients whenever they need them. These not only include the previously mentioned areas of oncology, respiratory, and vaccines but also advanced therapy medicinal products (ATMPs) as science continues to move forward. Moreover, as general manager, it is my objective to work with our industry counterparts through our trade association Pharma.be to explore how we can set up a sustainable and positive landscape for the future and what GSK can do to contribute.

Internally, I want to make sure the team has the right purpose and can contribute to making patients's lives better in Belgium. I want our team to continue to feel accountable for their business and have the courage to take smart risks within their area of influence so that we can be successful in building a sustainable business locally.

Looking forward to the next few years, there has already been amazing work done in Belgium, so it is critical to ensure the continued collaboration with the government, healthcare providers, and hospitals. I believe the healthcare industry sector must be seen as part of the solution for development in Belgium, and GSK is committed to using a science-led approach to improve people's lives.

Do you have any advice for women in the industry looking to follow your career path and be a successful leader?

My advice is not limited to women only, I think it applies to everyone. It is about staying true to yourself and not feeling like you must change to be successful. It is essential to keep in mind what your purpose is as a human being and a leader. I would encourage all women, or anyone aspiring to grow in their career, to have role models or mentors that they can work with, particularly in developing confidence in their leadership style and approach. Women often suffer from a lack of confidence in themselves even when others can see their value. Therefore, finding self-belief, creating a positive work-life balance, having the right mindset to challenge yourself and find opportunities will lead anyone to success.

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