

# Sonja Willems Managing Director, Janssen Benelux

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From early research and development, through manufacturing and drug delivery to the patient, our employees in Belgium make a significant contribution to the health of patients worldwide

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*Janssen in Belgium was founded in 1953 by Dr Paul Janssen, with only one thing in mind: saving people's lives through the development of better medicines. In 1961, the company was acquired by Johnson & Johnson. Sonja Willems, managing director of Janssen Benelux, discusses the company's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Janssen's collaboration with the Belgian government, and the company's support for the local R&D environment.*

## **How has COVID-19 impacted Janssen locally, and how have you responded to ensure operations continue during this turbulent period?**

Our main priority has been maintaining production levels to continue providing medicines to patients. Significant resources have been devoted to ensuring that this continues.

Furthermore, we have been working with the Belgian government to ensure that our supply chains remain open while guaranteeing the safety of our personnel. Many global supply chains for J&J are based in Belgium, so we produce either the finished products or intermediates, which are subsequently exported. Our international distribution sites in Courcelles and La Louvière play a critical role in delivering our medicines quickly and safely to pharmacies and hospitals around the world.

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Our second priority was to meet, where necessary, any requests from local stakeholders. For example, we were asked by a number of hospitals to assist them when they were low on supplies of disinfectant. Consequently, Janssen re-engineered a part of the supply chain within five days and obtained government approval to produce disinfectant liquids. These are now being produced and distributed to the hospital networks.

Given our unique footprint, we have been called on by the government for assistance too, particularly with regard to diagnostic testing of COVID-19. At the onset of the crisis, Belgium had limited testing capacity. Therefore, the government reached out to Janssen and other stakeholders to utilize some of the lab capacity for testing. Within ten days we were able to re-distribute resources and are now providing a large number of diagnostic tests for the Belgian government.

The third priority is to care for our 5000-strong workforce. We now have employees forced to work from home, often in suboptimal circumstances. We have tried to support them both from a social perspective, and through flexibility in work. Despite the uncertain circumstances, we endeavoured to reassure our people about their job security. Therefore, we did not put our employees on unemployment schemes. We wanted to ensure that employees maintained a stable income stream and have worked to involve them within our future focus.

### **What is the outlook for Janssen in Belgium, both in 2020 and beyond?**

Janssen develops treatments for some of the most devastating disorders and complex medical challenges of our times, including cancer, HIV/AIDS, dementia, and mental disorders. We focus our research on six strategic pathological areas: oncology, neurosciences, infectious diseases and vaccines, immunology, cardiovascular and metabolic disorders and pulmonary hypertension.

I think our outlook in Belgium is similar to that which J&J communicated in their first-quarter results: while the first quarter is on track, we do envisage the remainder of the year to be below the original forecast.

We are sitting on many new innovative ideas, providing us with a challenge to prioritize the right medicines to develop in the most efficient way. It is a reality that it still takes 10-15 years for basic research to finally reach patients. We must partner with both the European Union and the European Medicines Agency to find a way of streamlining the process, ensuring a more predictable procedure that brings treatments to patients in a timelier and more cost-effective manner.

We have a prominent role to play in Belgium by ensuring not only that our business remains healthy, but that we can support the development of healthcare and improvement of healthcare outcomes here in Belgium.

### **What are the major trends currently shaping the Belgian market?**

A trend, not only in Belgium, but in the whole of Europe, which has been worsened by COVID-19, is the economic situation. With all the investment in COVID-19 treatments and measures to counter its spread – which will continue until a vaccine is readily available – an economic downturn appears inevitable.

Furthermore, any economic crisis will worsen the existing strain on state healthcare budgets and bring new issues to light. The strengths and weaknesses within the system are now evident, be it a

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lack of testing capacity, or an insufficient number of nurses. Citizens will demand that these issues be rectified.

In Belgium, the number of nurses working in healthcare has become a salient issue; employing more nurses will add a new strain to healthcare budgets. We envisage that medicine budgets, despite their small proportion of total medical expenditures, will be under further scrutiny to find efficiency savings. There have already been discussions on the pricing of orphan drugs. As a prominent partner in Belgium, we need to ensure that Belgian patients continue to have access to innovation in a timely manner while operating within the limited medical budget available. Our upcoming challenge will be to strike a balance between medical and economic needs.

### **How have you seen authorities' attitudes evolve in terms of partnering with the pharmaceutical industry? What are the forms of partnership that can actually work?**

In 2015, under the leadership of Health Minister Maggie De Block, we signed the *Pact of the future* between the pharmaceutical industry – both the generic and innovative industries – and the Cabinet. I was the president of the national pharma association at that time and was heavily involved in the process.

Our goal was to guarantee that patients would have access to innovative treatments while agreeing not to divest from basic medicines and therapies.

Within the pact, it was agreed in line with the budget to reduce the price of off-patent medicines. Savings were subsequently redirected into the provision of new innovative medicines.

The pact was comprehensive, covering a wide array of areas, from patient co-payments to clinical trials. By the end of 2019, 85-90 percent of the package had already been implemented.

This is a real partnership which meets the demands of both the Belgian Government and the industry. I believe we have done the right thing for the government, for the industry, and for patients. This is now evident, given Belgium's position as one of the global leaders for patient accessibility to innovation.

### **What is Janssen's local R&D footprint and how are you supporting the R&D ecosystem in Belgium?**

The Janssen Campus in Belgium plays an essential role in the discovery and development of the new generation of medicines. In addition to the Research and Development Centre in Beerse, the Campus includes an important chemical production plant in Geel and a pharmaceutical production plant in Beerse – two leading production centres that play a central role in the global supply chain of Johnson & Johnson. From early research and development, through manufacturing and drug delivery to the patient, our employees in Belgium make a significant contribution to the health of patients worldwide.

We are supporting the entire development cycle. For basic R&D, we have many collaborations with major universities and research centres. Locally we invest EUR 1.5 billion (USD 1.64 billion) into R&D each year, much of which manifests itself through partnerships with local research centres. This often begins with basic research.

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We also have a strong clinical trial footprint in Belgium, partly thanks to the fast system of approval for trials in the country. This means that trials can be started both quickly and effectively. Our Clinical Pharmacology Unit in Merksem, near Antwerp, contributes to Belgium's top position in clinical studies.

We have a Phase I research institute in Antwerp and the only European JLABS [J&J's life sciences incubator - Ed.] for start-up companies. This is mainly focused on transitioning biotech start-ups into small companies, which is often the point in the cycle where a start-up will fail. We help them to overcome this challenge and develop their business.

### **What are the key functions that are necessary to ensure success for Janssen in Belgium?**

Anyone who has contact with a customer or stakeholder is especially critical for our operations. I strongly believe in the strength of an outside-in style organization. In the past, the pharmaceutical industry has been an inside-out industry. This is logical, given that we possess significant expertise and knowledge internally. Nevertheless, while such a strategy may have been successful in the past, I believe that we will be most effective through collaborations with stakeholders and ensuring a mutual understanding. I believe it will be a significant cultural change, but it is imperative for Janssen's continued success.

### **What advice would you give to someone building their career in the pharma industry?**

Anyone setting out on a career in the pharmaceutical industry should first and foremost focus on their strengths. The best way to achieve success is to be aware of one's strengths and understand what is most rewarding. For example, a detail-oriented person could specialize in finance, while someone more strategy-oriented could best utilize their talents by moving into management.

An especially important piece of advice for young female talent is to be confident in oneself and believe in one's own ability.

Finally, it is important to take risks and embrace the unknown. When I decided to transfer to Canada, I was unaware of what I was getting into, likewise when I moved into the medical device division. It is important to take these risks and learn from any mistakes or setbacks.

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