

FROM FARMER TO PHARMA

Nigel Brooksby's pharmaceutical career has spanned an impressive 30 years. As sanofi-aventis UK managing director, he is clear in his vision of the challenges facing the industry in a competitive and volatile market. But what are those challenges, how can they be addressed and, more importantly, who is the man behind the title? Andrew Tunnicliffe finds out.



Nigel Brooksby

Nigel Brooksby, managing director of sanofi-aventis UK, has been an influential figure within the pharmaceutical sector in the UK and around the world. He worked his way up the managerial ladder leaving behind a trail of successes that culminated in his appointment as president of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry in 2006.

When you were younger, what career did you see for yourself?

I was born into a farming family and developed a passion for the countryside at a very early age. However, I was advised by my family not to go into farming!

How did you first get into the pharmaceutical industry?

In my final year at university, I applied to several pharmaceutical companies. The Wellcome Foundation was unique as they offered me the opportunity to spend a day with a medical representative, then offered me a job and a career.

You began your career over 30 years ago as a medical rep with the Foundation but quickly progressed into management. Did the speed of that progression alter your ambition or goals?

Wellcome was a great place to learn and move forward quickly. I had my first general manager's role at 28 – managing the company in Iran during a very difficult period for the people and the country. It was a real responsibility and a challenge, and it whetted my appetite to build an international career in the pharmaceutical industry.

How has the pharmaceutical industry changed in the time you have been involved?

The industry is facing new challenges and pressures – it's changed over the last 30 years and the pace of change is accelerating. R&D is under scrutiny and, at the same time, patents are expiring on major medicines. Historically, the investment opportunity in pharma has been seen as low risk with reliable growth, but sentiment has changed rapidly. Sustained profitable growth to rebuild confidence is a bigger challenge for the future.

There is also a major change in the increasing influence of new customers and stakeholders – mainly governments and regulators. A survey suggested that governments will have overtaken the medical profession as the most influential healthcare industry stakeholder in the next three years.

You have highlighted a number of big changes and challenges that the industry will face in coming years, suggesting 2008 will be a 'tipping point'. What do you believe will be the single biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge for our global pharmaceutical industry will be to better manage the expectations of both the new customers and stakeholders. Clearly there will be winners and losers where the winners adopt a more outward facing focus to all stakeholders. This will be difficult for some companies as traditionally the industry is often viewed as very inward-looking. The companies that generate sales from innovative new medicines that can critically offset the inevitable attrition which follows patent expiration, will fare best in the future.

During the merger of Sanofi-Synthelabo and Aventis there must have been some testing times. How did you cope with the pressure of this merger, spearheading it at the UK end?

Recognising that mergers are extremely stressful for everyone is vital. The first reaction is 'Help! We're being merged. Will I have a job? Where will we be located? Who will be my new boss?' Taking responsibility and recognising there will be a period of uncertainty before transparency and trust will be re-established is imperative. Rebuilding the new company's confidence, communicating with passion the vision for the new company and inspiring people on that journey is a real responsibility and a very privileged position.

From April 2006 to April 2008 you were president of the ABPI. This time must have been pretty hectic. What strategies did you adopt to help cope with these two big roles and did you achieve everything you wanted during those two years?

When I was elected ABPI president in 2006, I had great support from my global chairman and the senior management team in sanofi-aventis. This is essential if you are to be successful handling the very different roles. As ABPI president, I met with our stakeholders, spelt out our combined vision in the manifesto – the right medicine for the right patient at the right time. This gave us a shared and compelling vision of the journey, not just for my privileged years as president, but beyond and into the future.

I certainly didn't anticipate that the UK would be re-negotiating the PPRS for the industry having just signed a five year agreement in 2005. This created a feeling of instability, but I'm optimistic that by working closely with the UK government, we will emerge with a new five-year PPRS scheme that gives the UK pharma industry a position of sustained global competitiveness and attractiveness for inward investment.

It is clear that you place a lot of importance on the need to communicate, right from industry to government and within your own organisation. What are the benefits of communication and the dangers of not doing so?

We all need to know where we are going and how to get there. In a rapidly changing industry we need to communicate and inspire with our vision. It's a great adventure, but only achievable if we manage to establish the passion and the partnerships to excel.

What steps do you take, personally, to ensure that you have the ears to offer your colleagues?

Being accessible, ordinary, transparent and giving time to listen to what people want.

What one thing are you most proud of, and why?

Having been part of a global industry, and the UK in particular, makes a real difference. Being part of a company that has made a real contribution to health is important to me. Having a wife and three daughters that have supported me: they are fantastic and my pride and joy.

If there was one thing you could change or perhaps do again what would that be?

You can always do things better and you can always do things differently. But you can only achieve real success if you remain open to change, listening and learning.

Is there something that you had always wanted to achieve, personally or professionally, but have never been able to?

If I had more talent, I'd have liked to represent the UK in a sporting achievement. However, my youngest daughter is emerging as a great horse person, so maybe the next generation.

Were there ever any times that you wished you had chosen another career?

Of course to have become an overnight billionaire in the dot.com boom would have been OK. But, seriously, the pharmaceutical industry is a brilliant industry.

What motivates you?

Motivation changes with age, but the constant factor is working with great people that you learn from on a daily basis makes you realise how much more you can achieve. Choosing a great boss is the essential secret ingredient to a high achievement career.

Your work is a big part of your life. Was it ever difficult to dedicate as much as you could to it and balance home life?

You need to talk to my wife. She has established balance in our family lives, but for a long time I did suffer from MSD – male selective deafness.

Has any of your daughters shown an interest in the work that you do, perhaps looking to follow you into the industry?

No, my three daughters are all doing fine, but not involved in the pharmaceutical industry...yet.

If you had been able to offer yourself some advice on your very first day at The Wellcome Foundation, what might that have been?

Don't limit your ambition or your options and take responsibility for your own career at a very early stage.

What advice would you offer aspiring candidates today?

The same when an industry faces new challenges and pressures: new people will step forward that will make a real difference to the future.

What are your hopes for the future? Where do you want to go next?

UK plc needs to quickly re-establish the trust and confidence for global pharma to continue to invest in innovation, research and science in the UK. For me, I've got the best job in the world – working with great people in the industry. But in the end, we shall need to make sure that in the UK there is fairness and equity in the delivery of healthcare and that the right patients receive the right medicine at the right time. This journey has started, but there is still a long way to go. **WPF**