

CHRIS VIEHBACHER

Chairman and CEO, Sanofi-Aventis

Narendra Taneja, Energy CEO and Convener, World Oil & Gas Assembly (WOGA)

May I ask you a question, Chris, about your corporation? How do you look at this? There is a kind of impression within countries in the developing world that large corporations such as yours are focusing more on the management of diseases and not really on the cure, because there is more money in managing diseases. Let us say, for the sake of discussion, that we are referring to diabetes or asthma and a number of other diseases. When you concentrate on the management of diseases, that is where the real money is.

Therefore, do you think that organisations such as the United Nations should get involved in order to set up centres of excellence across the world? These would focus only on finding cures for diseases. There is not much money in cures. How do you, as head of such a large corporation, which is one of the most admired corporations in this particular area, look upon the whole thing? Is it cure that you are obsessed with or management? That is because it helps your balance sheet.

Chris Viehbacher

You have to remember that first and foremost, it is science that is going to govern the answer. We would all like to see a cure, but I can tell you that we work with the top scientists and research organisations around the world. Where a cure is possible, one tries to find it. It is not always just about a cure; one should not forget prevention. Our company invests significant amounts of money in vaccines, for example.

Dengue is a huge threat and is exacerbated by climate change, because you now have higher temperatures, so you are now seeing dengue as far as the Southern parts of the United States. You are certainly seeing it in Caribbean islands and potentially in Southern Europe as well. We are spending over EUR1 billion to develop a dengue vaccine which we believe will be available in the next 2-3 years. Many vaccines have obviously been developed and we are the leader in vaccines.

I was just at the WHO on Thursday, at the invitation of Margaret Chan. We were discussing neglected diseases. Our company has thus far been the only company to be involved in sleeping sickness for example. There, the company has not only been giving away medicines, but making sure that the infrastructure was there. We have essentially provided USD15 million over the last few years, not only in provision of medicine. Because they are complicated, they are potentially toxic, we have provided the logistics. For example, we work with Médecins Sans Frontières to distribute the medicines. We provide the mopeds; we provide the physical education. Now, we also have a medicine that could prevent and eradicate sleeping sickness. It all depends on where the science is.

Narendra Taneja, Energy CEO and Convener, World Oil & Gas Assembly (WOGA)

I appreciate that. However, when you look at some very common diseases that are more widespread in continents such as Asia, you find that either nothing is happening in terms of finding a cure. Or else the basic focus is more on management. Do you support the idea that organisations such as the UN should be involved?

Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, President, Lagardère News

Since we were told to be candid and not hypocritical, what Narendra Taneja is criticising by targeting Sanofi Aventis as a model and symbol is that you're giving priority to money, the profit you could make, and thus management, etc. Even if you're making certain gestures, such as those you just mentioned, these are charitable and humanitarian efforts to hide the large profits you're otherwise making, if I may be allowed to put my foot in it a little.

Chris Viehbacher

We shouldn't forget that it's not the pharmaceutical industry which develops [research programmes] and discovers the causes of diseases. INSERM and CNRS are investing hundreds of millions of euros. Nor has anyone found causes of diseases which will lead to complete cures. But we're involved not only in treating diseases but also in preventing them. If you look at major trends, there's urbanisation.

There's the environment. There's the aging of the population. There's economic growth. All of these factors are interdependent. The more urbanisation there is, the more environmental problems there are. As urbanisation and access to health care increases, the more likely we are to discover what causes diseases. If you talk to the ministers of health in China, Mexico and Africa, [they'll tell you that] the major diseases are diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Diabetes is a preventable disease and it can be treated. In fact, we're committed to moving into prevention. I, for example, founded a CIO group which is trying to create a nutrition, sports, education and anti-smoking programme to protect employees from cancer. We're working with China's minister of health, for example, to launch a study on 40,000 patients to determine the causes of diabetes and find ways to prevent it.

Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, President, Lagardère News

That's also what you tried to do with obesity – actually, malnutrition in general, etc.