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# Profile: GSK's Mature Products Head Says Innovation Still Possible In Established Drugs Business

by [Lucie Ellis-Taitt](#)

Seasoned generics and intellectual property expert Richard Saynor went from poacher to game keeper when he became head of GlaxoSmithKline PLC's established products portfolio – tasked with growing the company's aging assets in new markets and protecting them from erosion by new generic options.

Richard Saynor, senior vice president and global head of classic and established products at [GlaxoSmithKline PLC](#), is responsible for teaching old dogs new tricks; he manages aging branded products and explores innovative options for 45-year-old drugs in new markets for the pharma giant.

A portfolio containing more than 500 brands, GSK's classical and established products business covers a vast number of therapy areas including respiratory, allergy, anti-infectives, CNS, dermatology and urology. Saynor, who is based in Singapore, has led the unit since 2013.

In the latest installment of *Scrip's* executive profile series Saynor, who has previously held senior roles in Merck Generics and Sandoz International, talks to Lucie Ellis about how he got into the generics business, challenges facing the industry and how GSK is different to other off-patent drug developers.

## Q Lucie Ellis: What led you into the industry?

**A** Richard Saynor: It was accidental. I trained as a pharmacist but I did a 'sandwich' degree at university and as a part of that I had a work placement at Roche. During that time I did two-week placements in different departments all over the company –

this gave me a great oversight of the industry and it was my first taste of the business side of things. I had a particular interest, from this experience, in sales and marketing and my roles in pharma grew from this. Up until my placement at Roche I was heading for a career in a hospital or retail pharmacy but I saw a very different perspective during my work placement.

**Q To what do you attribute your success in pharma?**

**A** I have passion and enjoy what I do. I have been lucky to find roles – or there have been roles that have found me – that I have really enjoyed, which helped me to be successful in those positions. People recognized that success and it created more opportunities. I have also had fantastic mentors that put me in positions I might not have put myself in, for example running a company at an early age or changing geographies and taking on new challenges. In parallel to that though I am very open to change, I have moved across the industry in many roles and have been open to trying many different things. It has been a great experience for me and my family, who have been able to travel to different parts of the world. I have faced many diverse challenges and opportunities.

**Q Who is your biggest influence and why?**

**A** I had really good professors at university and they gave me a generalist view rather than a very specialist view – this has been a common theme throughout my career. However, when I was younger my childhood hero was Surgeon-Captain Richard Jolly OBE, the chief medical officer during the Falklands Campaign. He was quite a character being a commander and a medic; he was a real boy's hero. Jolly was the only person in that campaign to be decorated by both the Argentinians and the British. One of the things I had wanted to do out of university was join the army – but pharmacy wasn't the best for a career in the armed forces so I ended up following another route into the pharma industry.

Later on in my career Tony Tabatznik was a big influence for me. He set up one of the first generics companies, that was later sold to Merck and eventually became Mylan. He also set up the Arrow Group and sold that business – he's a serial entrepreneur

and kind of the grandfather of the generics industry. Ironically he's now completely left that territory and works in media; but I did have the pleasure of working with him at one time.

**Q What are the biggest challenges currently facing companies selling generics and mature branded products?**

**A** Firstly, it's becoming a much more global industry and scrutiny by regulators is very high. The challenge now is being able to build a global supply network that is of good quality and cost effective – this is a common challenge across the entire industry. Secondly, how do you innovate? This might sound like a strange question but these are products that can still see growth. One example: we have invested heavily in antibiotic resistance data to help support physician engagement around anti-infectives. GSK is the largest provider of anti-infectives globally, so we have a responsibility to lead on this issue. Finally, how do we engage with payers and prescribers? We are very keen to pursue an access agenda and our goal is to treat more patients with high quality products. We need to find ways to do this that are cost effective, with governments, insurers or out-of-pocket in the various markets we work in.

**Q Where does the classic and established products portfolio fit in at GSK?**

**A** GSK has a very diverse portfolio of mature brands, many of which are around 35-45 years old but still class leaders in their therapy areas. It's down to the team to get the most out of those products through life cycle management. By that we mean how we can open up these products and drive access, particularly in the emerging markets. Furthermore we have to think about how we can evolve these established brands, for example through presentation changes and product extensions. We have to ensure these then feed back into manufacturing and supply chain, and align all of this with the wider GSK strategy. It's a large portion of GSK's base business and the established product portfolio is still very dynamic with more than 2,500 brands. We treat more patients globally than any other multinational company.

**Q How important is this area of the business?**

**A** In the emerging markets GSK's established products business is still a strong growth unit. It is a significant contributor of value to GSK and covers a large proportion of patients the company reaches. The established brands portfolio is effectively the foundation that allows GSK to develop and launch new products. In a number of markets some of these products are the number one brand still despite their patents having expired a number of years ago – they are strong brands that are still growing today in their own right.

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*“GSK wants to grow its business by treating more patients, not by treating fewer patients at a higher price.” – Richard Saynor*

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**Q What is the company's long-term plan for this area of business?**

**A** To continue to grow and support the wider business. There is an ever growing number of patients for these products in respiratory, anti-infectives, urology, dermatology... it's a very broad portfolio. We seek life-cycle changes and development changes to be able to continue to grow the unit and we are still innovators in this area. However we also have to align this with being able to keep prices low enough to compete.

**Q Does GSK do anything different in this area compared to its competitors?**

**A** We have done a lot over the last few years to build up our internal capabilities and to find ways to engage with physicians and healthcare professionals in a much more coordinated way. Most of the content globally to support these brands comes out of Mumbai and we engage with thousands of physicians through digital platforms. We have also built-up a cross functional team – for medical, regulatory, supply chain

and quality – who really support these brands. It's almost a unique organization within GSK that allows the business to focus on its core assets but allows us to also grow and treat more patients and drive a strong return.

**Q How did you get into this particular position?**

**A** I was approached by GSK while working in Singapore for a large, international generics company – I was running their emerging markets business – to look at heading up their mature business and branded generics. GSK was always a company I had admired, the timing was right and colleagues from past positions that I thought very highly of were also now working at GSK. The position also allows me to stay in Asia, which was something I was very keen to do.

**Q What are your own long term aspirations?**

**A** Right now, GSK is a very big, exciting business and the more we look at this mature products space the more opportunities we see. The scope and breadth of what we support has continued to grow. GSK has recently changed the way it engages with healthcare practitioners (HCPs) to bring in digital aspects and to find innovative ways to work with markets and prescribers – so this is an exciting time for GSK and me in my current role. For the first time the industry has realized it is not just about your ability to have a sales force – it's about having the right connectivity. The next few years for classic and established products will be a very interesting period.

**Q If you were starting over what's the best bit of advice you would give to your younger self?**

**A** Take more risks earlier on. I wish I had worked overseas sooner in my career. It's always easy at the time to rationalize not taking some opportunities, whether it's personal or career reasons, but really it's the calculated risks that you take that open up the best opportunities.

**Q If you weren't a pharma executive, what would you be?**

**A** I would like to be an entrepreneur: if I have a regret it is not setting up my own company and running my own business.

**Q** What has been your proudest moment?

**A** My career has been a story of two halves: the first half I spent challenging patents and launching generics against innovator companies like GSK; the second half has seen me as poacher turned to game keeper I suppose, as I grow some of those off-patent brands. For me some of that growth, particularly in emerging markets, has been incredible. Patients are at the heart of this industry and we are managing now to treat more patients than ever. The fact that we can take products that are 35-40 years old and see them become number one products in places like India, which has traditionally been seen as the most aggressively generic market in the world, I think that is incredible. So I'm very proud of that.

**Q** And what about your most difficult moment?

**A** The toughest moment was when I was CEO of a company in the UK and I had to close one of the manufacturing sites. At the time I was in my early thirties, having to sit down with a few hundred people and tell them they didn't have a job anymore was incredibly difficult. While there was a commercial rationale, the human consequence was hard.

**Q** What was the last thing you changed your mind about in a business decision?

**A** I suppose it would be around a couple of products that traditionally we wouldn't have supported. I came to GSK to expand the branded generics business and initially that plan wasn't successful. However, we did see opportunity for some of the brands we already owned; with a little bit of resource you can get phenomenal results. GSK now has the capability to manage mature assets in a different way to some of its competitors and this capability has now become an integral part of GSK's business.

**Q** What current trend in your field would you highlight as the most exciting and why?

**A** Mature products are growing – maybe not as much in the US – but they are not all declining, particularly in areas like Eastern Europe and the emerging markets.

**Q** Tell us one myth about the industry that you'd like to set straight.

**A** Ultimately the industry does a lot more good than it is credited for. It's a business and we make money out of people being sick and that is emotionally challenging – but GSK tries very hard to do the right thing and treat patients in the right way. We as a company try to find that balance between being a business and doing the right thing for our patients. The industry doesn't get great press, for example all the concerns right now around price gouging, but GSK wants to grow its business by treating more patients, not by treating fewer patients at a higher price.

*CORRECTION: This story was updated on Oct. 12, 2016. Previously it stated GSK's established products portfolio contained "more than 2,500 brands". This has been corrected to "more than 500 brands".*