

February 24, 2021

Welcome to WoW – the woman of the week podcast. This episode was made possible by a generous sponsorship from the Healthcare Business Women’s Associate. For more information, visit HBA.net.org.

In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor of PharmaVOICE Magazine, meets with Rebecca Vermeulen, VP Patient & Society Strategy Product Development, Head of Healthcare and Patient Partnership Teams at Roche.

Taren: Rebecca, welcome to the WoW podcast program.

Rebecca: Thank you, Taren. I am so honored and thrilled to be with you. I mean that sincerely. This is a real highlight for me, so thank you for reaching out so that I could participate.

Taren: It’s our honor and I’m just thrilled to reconnect with you. Congratulations, again, on being named to PharmaVOICE 100 in 2020. It feels like that was so long ago, but really not. We are living in the accelerated time frame of COVID. It’s great to reconnect with you. Rebecca, you and I know each other a little bit, just for transparency for our audience. So, I know that throughout your career you have been at the forefront of developing programs and creating strategies that are patient centric. Tell us a little bit about why patients are always so important at the forefront for you.

Rebecca: Taren, you’re right. This is certainly a passion for me. I’m a pharmacist by background and I’ve really always cared about health, how to make other people better. One of my passions really throughout my career has been empowering people with the information they need to make better decisions. It’s just kind of what I do and what I care about. This is true, as well, for people on my teams as well as the people that we’re trying to help. I think the more we can empower people with good information, the better choices they can make. I saw this firsthand when patients are in control of their lives. Really it’s about how we can support this and make a meaningful impact.

I have a real personal goal in this space, too. I think it’s about how we can drive towards patient driven health and science. I say that really, truly, in patient driven health and science where we can create inclusive environments where all voices are heard. It requires patients, scientists, health authorities, health decision makers, everybody really coming together. I think sometimes we lose sight of the mutual goal while trying to do good. When the patients aren’t at the table with us co-creating solutions then unintentionally sometimes we can lose sight of what’s most important and relevant for them. I think we have to keep the outcomes that are most important for them at the forefront whenever we’re making decisions.

Taren: I couldn't agree with you more. That's excellent. You touched on something there and we're talking about especially right now where we are and talking about health equity. You just touched on it a little bit. I know that you have been also involved in so many partnerships. That really feels like this is a convergence of a couple of different passions for you. So, how do you think the industry in general can create more meaningful partnerships with patients to increase our health equity?

Rebecca: You're right. I hit on a real passion here when it comes to health equity. I'm going to tell you something about myself. I really don't believe in a two-tiered society. I mean that in the way where there's one section or group of people who are informed and the empowered people, and then the other tier of people who are the uninformed and helpless. In reality all people should be able to be in control of their lives. They have a right for that. And they should be fully informed if that's what they choose.

For me it's really all people, regardless of your socioeconomic status or your cultural backgrounds, it's not that healthcare professionals aren't the authority, rather really seeing them as committed advisors who are helping patients and all of the people who surround them to improve their health and happiness. I think with that mindset everyone has a right to have a seat at the table.

As it relates to collaboration within the industry, the more the merrier. Sincerely. The more collaboration we can do, the more impact we're going to have. There's not going to be one company that takes a lead and stands out. This space is not about a competition. It really is about helping people and society improve. I think the companies that are willing to come to the table and collaborate in this way will be the ones that by doing what's right the value will come as a result of this.

I think if we're going to do this well and right we have to work together. Data standards, personalized healthcare, at the end of the day it's about data. The more data we can create, the more we can learn, the more we can tailor and the more solutions that we're able to create to prevent disease and really keep people healthy. It's what we all want.

Really I just go back to that patient driven health and science means that all entities have to come together in this space if we're going to make a meaningful difference.

Taren: I love that. That's the rising tide lifts all boats, right? That philosophy. We're all in it together, and we should all be in it together. It's a wonderful thought. Tell me what specifically your company, Roche / Genentech, is doing in particular to help move the needle.

Rebecca: I think the opportunity to collaborate has never been stronger. We're contributing to a number of IMI initiatives, we're joining consortiums to be able to support a movement around decentralized trials. We're joining industry collaborations around data standards and working together collaboratively as it relates to data and privacy to ensure that patients maintain the right to their data and that we're using that in the right way.

I really think this takes us working together through these situations. It's funny to me, I think one of the greatest learnings we've had through COVID is you see this fragmentation of healthcare. When the world stopped last March and patients needed access to their treatment and people were afraid to go into health institutions and they weren't getting the care, we as the industry were working to seek solutions. You have to work together to find the alternatives and solutions that are going to work. You can't just place yourself and that burden on patients.

I think, really, whatever we can do to support patients so that they can maintain their care is essential. If we show up as a single entity then it's almost like we're contributing to the fragmentation. Right?

Taren: Yeah.

Rebecca: Because what we're bringing is this siloed thinking, this kind of egotistic we're going to be the one to save patients. That doesn't help patients. If we're really going to make a positive difference I think we have to be humble, I think we have to take down our walls, I think we have to listen and I think we have to work together to do what's right.

Taren: Excellent, I couldn't agree with you more, again. You have some unique insights into some of the trends that are coming down the pike given a couple of volunteer roles that you have held over the last couple of years. Significant volunteer roles. One is Chair of the Global Board of Directors for the Drug Information Association. And the second as a two-year run as Chair of the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association. But let's tackle the DIA first. Tell me about some of the things that you learned, that you influenced, that you visioneered for the DIA. That was a very significant role at a very significant time in the industry.

Rebecca: Yeah, it was a real honor, I have to say, an absolute honor to help lead the DIA's strategic vision for the future as we pivoted as an organization. Really I'm so grateful and humbled for the experience that I learned. So much of what we've experienced is just what we were talking about, bringing the industry together, working with regulators, seeking opportunities where we can harmonize, solve solutions together. Again, this environment has just amplified that.

I think for me since I've been involved with the DIA I've been able to share my voice and my experience in a way that helps support their evolution and make some changes. DIA has always stood on a foundation of convening and connecting, really connecting constituents across healthcare to focus on the most important priorities. And I've said in today's world those priorities became evidently clear. The more that we can do to support that harmonization of standards and really championing some of these emerging trends that really need to be amplified, I think that's where we've been able to make a difference as DIA in fostering this cross-industry and regulatory collaboration.

And I have, I felt a lot of pride for how the organization has evolved to do just that. And to become more patient centric. I think on a personal level given my passion and commitment one of the things that I personally am most pleased about the organization is the movement over

the last few years to become much more patient focused and patient centered. DIA is built on this foundation, but I think one example of opportunities that we're able to do is when we began engaging patients as fellows and working across all of the disciplines within the industry so that they were engaging as patients across the drug development at every step along the way. By doing that and doing it with patients we've been able to influence the industry and think about how you work with patients to co-create solutions.

This, given my passion and what we've been talking about, is just so incredibly fulfilling to see that kind of impact that you can have personally, professionally and to watch the organization continue to evolve in this way.

Taren: Excellent. What should we look for from the DIA in the next 12 to 24 months? Because those are going to be plans that were put into place under your tenure there.

Rebecca: Thank you for asking that question. It's always good when you can step away but look ahead and see how the organization, what they're doing as you set the strategy. For me I know that this learning through COVID, so the DIA as I've mentioned has done a wonderful job convening multi-stakeholder groups and bringing them together so that we can learn through the COVID experience. We're going to continue those forums to really foster this sharing and the engagement. Whether that's, as I've mentioned before, decentralized trials or another really important area that, again personal passion space for me, has been about information disclosure. I want to see that everybody has access to the information to make right decisions.

One of the things that's really been highlighted in the last year is the incredible amount of misinformation that exists out there. I'm working in a company where we, as many other companies, are actively working to find solutions. You know what? Sometimes they don't work. And you want to be able to tell patients and healthcare professionals the best options for them, but the way our environment is construed, in particular in the medical affairs space where I live, you're really pretty limited. You can't be very proactive when speaking with healthcare professionals, and even more careful with patients. Unless people are asking it's really hard to be proactive sometimes in this space.

We've kicked off some real strategic discussions that I'm looking forward to that will be happening here in the very near future just looking at information disclosure and how do we make sure that people are accessing the right information so that when you, like me, do your Google search because you're looking for what potential options there could be, you're actually getting access to the right information. And that as a company we're proactively communicating this is the data and information you need to know.

There's lots of considerations, certainly, that need to be taken into consideration to this well and right, but so important given the time that we're in these days.

Taren: Oh my gosh, so important. There's survey after survey about how misinformation is affecting patients and patient outcomes and where patients are getting their information. It's scary out there sometimes when you just do a simple Google search. The survey after survey

shows that patients rely on their friends more so than almost any other source, so if your friend has bad info you have bad info.

Rebecca: Yes, just like the spread of the virus isn't it, right? From one to the next. So unintentionally, but it's just what happens.

Taren: Yes, so I love that idea around giving people the information they need, the right information they need and that goes back to data privacy and data security, as well. But really getting out that information. And as we as a society become even more digitally entrenched it's going to become even more important.

Rebecca: I agree, and the other topic related to that, very closely joined, is real world evidence. And just what we're learning. It goes back to this discussion around data, the more we have the more meaningful it is. I think what we're learning, and certainly from the patient perspective, the willingness to be able to share your information on behalf of the good of society. We're all stepping into this space together. I know that's another topic that's really important for the DIA, as well, is how do we continue to evolve our standards in the industry working with regulators around real-world evidence as well.

Taren: Absolutely. I think if there's one silver lining to come out of COVID it's that the general public has a great appreciation and knowledge into how drugs are developed, how vaccines are developed and what clinical trials mean and how they can be a part of the greater good. We look for that, every silver lining we can find, amongst all the tragedy.

Rebecca: Yes, absolutely. I agree wholeheartedly. And how do we capitalize on those silver linings.

Taren: And accelerate those silver linings. It's capitalism the best way. It's taking advantage of the opportunities that are in front of us as an industry. Not to go back to necessarily doing things the old way, but to make some leaps, take some calculated risks and move the needle in a significant fashion.

Rebecca: Yeah, you've just got to keep learning and building. I think that feedback loop of what's working, what's not, how do we continue to evolve. As an industry – we talk about being vulnerable as people, but as an industry how do we be vulnerable and learn?

Taren: Absolutely. Thank you so much for providing us with those insights into what the DIA's doing and what we should look forward in the next couple years towards. Let's get to your second volunteer role. This is, obviously, a shared passion for the two of us. It was your run as a two-year Chair of the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association. I don't know how you did it, but tell me what this experience meant to you. And then we'll talk about some of the things you did to set up the organization for success.

Rebecca: Yeah, you're right. Let's just acknowledge for both of us, HBA is very, very close to our hearts. For me personally that opportunity to lead the global Board of Directors was really a

true honor. I have to say it was a highlight of my career. Even though there were times where it was crazy and I asked myself what am I doing, you do it because you care. We choose to give our time to the things that we care about and the things that are our passions. For me the HBA's commitment has always been how do we advance the impact for women in the business of healthcare. For me personally this is a passion. For me it's about creating an inclusive environment, so there's a very consistent theme from just who I am. Yeah, when we got into this industry, when I came into this industry a long, long time ago there were some real expectations for me. How I show up, standards that were applied to leadership, what I needed to look like, what I needed to wear.

I think from that experience it just really lit this passion and fire within me to say, gosh, how do I go about my own journey as a leader staying true to myself. And allowing myself to be vulnerable even though gosh, gosh, gosh it's hard. But allowing yourself to be really open and helping other women through the journey as well. And working through that shared experience is where you can learn and make sure that your voice is heard when you're the only woman in the room. For me, in my realities that was oftentimes the case. Not only was I the only woman in the room, but I was the only woman that was a non-physician in many instances. I really had to learn how to be true to myself.

I think in many ways the HBA has given me the opportunity to do this and to fight for gender equality while raising others up, to take on new challenges and to have a sense of confidence that we can do it and that we can be ourselves and we can bring what we have as our strengths to the table and feel good about it. That, to me, it is a very personal commitment and mission for me and why it's just been such an incredible honor to lead the HBA and help them continue on this platform to support our future leaders.

Taren: I'll tell you it was an honor to watch you chair the organization through some pretty significant milestones there and navigating some rough waters that every organization has gone through over the last 18 months or so. But, tell me, can you name a couple of highlights that you experienced as Chair? What are some things that stand out to you?

Rebecca: Yeah, certainly first and foremost and probably just the most immediate thing over the last year – you and I have both been involved with the HBA for a long, long time. It is our community, it is our space where can come and be who we are in a safe, trusted environment. I think through that environment and culture within HBA from a leadership perspective, we really had an opportunity this last year to take a stand and really focus on what's relevant for our future leaders.

Beyond the pandemic, and we can talk about that, but we also experienced quite a bit of social unrest. I think for the organization to make sure that we're listening to all of the voices across all races, diverse backgrounds, everyone to be heard, I think we had a real opportunity to take a stand for issues that are important in these times. You see that within the industry now. Diversity has never been a more important topic, as it always should be an important topic, but in particular in this time I know that HBA is well positioned to elevate and amplify the needs of our communities because we have taken a stance and we have spoken up and we've

represented our member communities. I think working very closely with our corporate partners as well to help them understand the right position where women and men can work together and talk about these topics that can be very difficult to talk about.

For me that's one of the things that I've really appreciated, is just how HBA has positioned itself for the future as an organization where all companies and all people, all members of healthcare can come together and support ourselves and think about that with an eye towards the future of really how you make the world a better place.

And then, secondly, the other highlight for me was, of course, leading the organization as we pivoted through COVID. HBA's an organization that is built on the foundation of in-person community building. That's done with very personal relationships. To make a pivot and shift overnight into a totally virtual world where all of our connections to our members and our corporate partners could still be maintained, that essence of HBA is our radical hospitality could still be felt. How do you do that as an organization? Doing that and being able to advance these important issues was not easy, lots of scenario planning, lots of learning, talk about the learning to do that.

But I'm so thankful, one, for the support that HBA got. Through those learnings I really feel like we did that and we did more. The HBA team itself, illuminate was incredibly successful. The leadership conference brought more attendees in this virtual world than we've ever had. And while it's true you and I, Taren, can talk about how we miss that sense of personal connection with each other, I have to say that as HBA if you attended the leadership conference while that sense of connection was not quite the same it still was felt. And I'll personally disclose when the conference ended I just sat there and stared at my computer with tears in my eyes because I didn't want it to end.

Taren: That's so great. That's great. Kudos to you and to the entire team because it is a volunteer effort for most of it. While the HBA has an incredible staff it really is the volunteer leaders that are the heartbeat of that organization. Congratulations to all of you who really made that pivot so successful.

Rebecca: I appreciate that. And I will also say, because I couldn't speak about this and not mention the incredible leadership that Laurie Cooke provides to the organization and her staff that really, truly were partners hand-in-hand in helping the organization pivot. If it wasn't for Laurie and her team around us we would not have made that shift. I think many nonprofit organizations are struggling in these times. Fortunate for us we've been able to survive and continue to grow, which is pretty unbelievable.

Taren: It is amazing. It really, truly is. But at the same time even as successful as HBA has been and been able to maintain during COVID, we're just seeing so many distressing reports about the fallout in terms of women leaving the workforce. What impact do you think this is going to have on generations to come, Rebecca? It's scary some of those numbers.

Rebecca: Yeah, it is. It's an issue and it's one that I spent more and more time thinking about. I think for healthcare overall if you look at the data for the last few years we actually have been making strides as it relates to gender equality and elevating women in more leadership positions. But even at that we still weren't where we needed to be. And through this pandemic, wow, what you see is that trends are leveling out or declining and not rising as they've been in the past.

Let's be honest, women are just hanging on. In these times we're doing what we can, right? And I think companies need to extend their arms to provide a different level of support, which is really unknown. It's not that there isn't empathy and understanding in many cases, it's just understanding what to do. Because the data do show, just as you said, that more and more women are considering stepping back from their careers. I really believe this is the leading indicator of what's to come. I think, again, how will we see these trends in the future? I think while women are doing everything we can to hang on and maintain some sense of control, resilience levels are getting low.

Taren: So many women are managing the little children and also caring for aging parents, plus trying to do a full-time job and career. All of that is just the pressures are more intense than ever it seems.

Rebecca: Yes, it's crazy. And you think about that for the younger generations who are witnessing and experiencing these times. I think what you see is they see the burden that's coming to their moms, their sisters, their coworkers. I do believe it will shift expectations in the future. I think that more flexible options will continue to be the norm, not the gift but the norm. And I think in practice – go ahead.

Taren: I was going to say that's good to hear, I'm sorry.

Rebecca: Yeah, I think that companies are just going to have to commit to this flexibility in ways that they haven't before. I think, also – and this is a little bit of a good piece for women, I think, we're getting better at practicing prioritization.

Taren: Yes.

Rebecca: One of the known attributes of women is that we take on more, right?

Taren: Yes.

Rebecca: Big, small, we roll up our sleeves and get 'er done.

Taren: Exactly.

Rebecca: And we just can't. We have to be more selective about what we choose to give our time to. And I think, thirdly, this spirit of collaboration it will continue to grow. People have to work together to share and divide work. So the more we can divide and share work equally to

achieve a common goal, I think that's going to become the working standards and the norms. Instead of one person leading and others contributing, we all have to come to the table. Again, that's a good thing and something that I think also speaks to the natural skills of women when we're working together in teaming environments and sharing more of the burden. Let's continue to think about the positive what could come, but right now it's a crazy time.

Taren: It is a crazy time. Thank you so much for sharing some glimpses of optimism there. I think we're all going to continue to struggle until some women can figure out how to add six more hours into that 24-hour day. But here we are, right? It's our new reality, it's where we are. I'm going to gloat on you a little bit. You've won a number of awards for your so many contributions. I can't even list them all, HBA San Francisco, Legacy Award, Lifetime Achievement Award for Medical Affairs from the Drug Information Association, numerous awards from Genentech and Roche for your International Women's Network contributions. Clearly, clearly you are a role model for women. What does this mantle of responsibility mean to you?

Rebecca: Oh, Taren.

Taren: Rebecca.

Rebecca: I mean, honestly, I mean yeah it's the most humbling and gratifying experiences. Really, I could never have imagined. Honestly, I could never have imagined I would be so blessed and be given the opportunity to touch so many people. For me it's not about the accomplishment. It's about making a difference for other people. For me it's all about that empowerment and helping people make good choices and being their best. It's who I am.

I think for me every time I'm notified about an award it's really a sign that I must be doing something right for other people. I think it's a real reflection of the people I've been able to touch and make better. That's really satisfying for me. I mentioned earlier as people we really choose to give our time and energy to the things and people that we care about. It's a real choice and it's a commitment. When you fully commit to something there's always time to give. You make the time for the things you care about. I give my time to others because I choose to do this, because this is where I get my personal fulfillment and energy. I'm always shocked and honored, truly humbled, when a nice accomplishment comes. But for me it's just good then hopefully I've been able to make a difference in the people around me. And the people that will come behind me.

Taren: I knew you were going to be humble about this, but I have to say, give you a shout out that you own that stage, girl, like a boss. I have seen you present on numerous occasions and you are absolutely fearless. It is quite a sight to see. I want to let you know that I am so inspired by you. You rock it.

Rebecca: I'm glad this is a podcast and you can't see my fire red face right now.

Taren: Well, I'm just talking truth to power there, that's all. So, you've talked a lot about some of the things that you have done along the way. But are there a couple of concrete tips you can

share with other women who might want to reach that executive level that they just aren't taking advantage of?

Rebecca: Yeah, my perspective would be this. One, be yourself. That's a reflection of my journey. We have to come into this space authentically who we are. And follow your passion. And, third, I would say give. And then give some more. Give to the people that surround you, give your time to work that is meaningful. Make sure people can see and recognize what you're giving, and in a good way. When you give and give and you're giving your best also recognize when you're not your best. I think it's really important for all of us as leaders that we have to be willing to acknowledge when we need to step back, when we need to take a pause and take care of ourselves.

From my perspective it really is find a cause that you can commit to. Speak that so people are aware of your passions, so that they know what you're committed to. And give your all. When you need to take a breather, take a breather. And then go back in the game and keep giving.

Many times we step back as women and we do really great work, but people don't really fully appreciate that. One of the things that I've really learned on this journey is that I will always give my time to the things that I care about. And I also need to have that voice to make sure that people do know what I care about and the difference that I'm making. I hope that's helpful in sharing some perspective.

Taren: I think that's exactly right. I don't think women speak up enough, they don't get the recognition for the good work that they do. And so often it's heads down and waiting for somebody to recognize you, or recognize us. But that's not the case. You need to find your voice and you need to make sure your voice is heard. That's a great piece of advice.

Finally, as we wind up our time together tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that either shaped or changed the trajectory of your career. It could be something that moved you and that you'll remember.

Rebecca: I'll share with you a story that I haven't shared very much. It's a personal story but something that really did pivot my commitment and energy that I bring to this space around patients. I was talking earlier about the Drug Information Association and years ago when we started involving patients as a part of our community directly I had the opportunity to host one of the very first sessions that we ever did where a patient was speaking with me. And this wonderful gentleman, Steven, who was an adult with SMA, spinal muscular atrophy, came to speak. Of course, the topic was on how we can collaborate as an industry.

So we get to the meeting room and we needed to get there early because he had – just getting into the room, wheelchair, getting up to the podium, making sure everything was setup for him so that he could be comfortable. We're in the room before anybody comes in and it's just he and I. I look over and I'm wanting him to be really comfortable. I just made some side comment about, "Hey, Steven, are you ready for this?" in that kind of positive, upbeat energy. Steven

looked at me and he motioned his hand and he said, “Rebecca, I want you to come here.” I did and I kneeled in front of him so that we could see each other face-to-face.

He looked at me straight in my eyes and he said, “I’m so happy to be here today. This isn’t about doing it together, per se. Here’s what I want and what I need from you. I know my fate. I know I’m not going to be here. Can you imagine? Rebecca, take my data, take anything you want from me. Please stop this horrible disease. I don’t want anyone else to experience the pain that I have suffered through. So talk to me, ask me what’s important, tell me what you can do and listen as I share with you what I need as a patient suffering in this space.”

Yeah, you can imagine the tears in my eyes, the tears in his eyes. It was really in that moment that I made that shift and thought, well, I am going to do whatever I can do to make a difference in this space. From that experience many years ago to then I was given the opportunity to create the department that I have an opportunity to lead today. That was about three years ago. You carry that forward. I moved my family to Switzerland to create this Global Patient Partnership team and to further advance our work in medical communications and doing everything we can to help support patients and patient communities. My family moving to a new culture, shaping this and now bringing this perspective for patient centricity into product development honestly, Taren, when I received the PharmaVOICE 100 award last year that was kind of the end of the circle. It was at that moment where I realized so I am making a difference. I still think about that day and that circle from my very first interaction with Steven to the day I was notified for receiving the award, and I still get chills. Sincerely. That’s my wow moment. I mean, when you can contribute and complete a circle and just kind of have that experience it stays with you forever.

Taren: Well, I have a lump in my throat. I can’t even imagine how you could then stand up in front of a room full of people and then present. Talk about cool under pressure, my friend. Wow, that’s a powerful story. Thank you so much for sharing it. I know that’s very close to you and it’s very personal. I am completely moved by that. I think those are the stories that really inspire so many people to do what they do. That’s why we do this WoW podcast, as well. We want to share these stories out there and really put a spotlight on the women in this industry who are making such a difference.

Rebecca, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for being so transparent and authentic and providing so many tremendous insights for our audience. It’s been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Rebecca: Thank you, Taren. It is an honor, sincerely an honor, to spend this time with you. Thank you.

Thank you for listening to this episode of WoW – the woman of the week podcast. And thanks to HBA for making this episode possible. For more information, visit HBAnet.org. And don’t forget to check out our other WoW episodes at PharmaVOICE.com/wow