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How The UK Self-Care Industry Coped With COVID-19 And Brexit in 2020

by [David Ridley](#)

PAGB CEO Michelle Riddalls tells HBW Insight what it was like to lead the UK consumer health industry during 2020 in the middle of Brexit and COVID-19.

On 23 January 2020, a family travels to the UK from Hubei province, China, to visit their son, a 23-year-old University of York student. Later, the son rings the emergency helpline NHS 111 to say he and his mother both have a fever and a cough, indicating the first cases of COVID-19 in the country.

On the same day, Queen Elizabeth II gives Royal Assent to the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, marking the end of one long chapter of painful negotiation, and beginning another, as the clock begins ticking on the Brexit transition period.

Caught in the middle of these two huge events – both unpredictable in their own ways but for different reasons – the UK self-care industry has tried its best to steer through one of the most turbulent periods of British history.

For Michelle Riddalls, who was recently appointed CEO of the UK self-care industry association, the PAGB, this was truly a trial by fire, having taken over from former chief John Smith at the beginning of April, in the middle of the country's first national coronavirus lockdown. (Also see "[UK's PAGB Appoints Michelle Riddalls As New CEO](#)" - HBW Insight, 27 Mar, 2020.)

PAGB CEO MICHELLE RIDDALLS

In this exclusive interview, Riddalls tells HBW Insight what it was like to take the reins in such unprecedented times, reflecting on the agility and adaptability of industry in the face of crisis, as well as the successes of the PAGB in pushing self-care to the forefront of regulatory concerns, both with regards to Brexit and COVID-19.



As the UK endures its second national lockdown, thanks to a surge in coronavirus cases since winter and new, more aggressive COVID-19 variants, Riddalls insists that industry is well-prepared to face the challenges of 2021.

You took over the PAGB leadership from John Smith – who held the reins for five years – in the middle of the pandemic. What was that like?

A It was an interesting time to take over for sure. I was very lucky because I already knew the team, having been senior director of Regulatory Affairs and Advertising Services since June 2019, which made it so much easier because it wasn't like I was dealing with an unknown entity and having to work everything out. On my first day we were already in lockdown. Almost immediately I was invited to one of the UK government's Ministerial Implementation Groups and also to the Life Sciences COVID-19 Response Group, a ministerial group co-chaired by Lord Bethell and Nadhim Zahawi MP. That enabled me to link in with the wider Life Sciences industry and get involved in helping with COVID-related issues that were facing the sector.

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This meant that as CEO I could build stronger connections with a lot of my industry colleagues more quickly than I might have done otherwise. I could also help our self-care industry members by feeding back what was going on, as well as alerting the government to some of the problems that companies were facing as we went on. One of the outcomes of this work was the Life Sciences Recovery Roadmap, co-authored with six other key sector organisations. (Also see "[Self-Care Key To UK's Post-COVID Recovery](#)" - HBW Insight, 25 Jun, 2020.) We really pushed to embed into that document some of the self-care information that we had developed during the pandemic, for example how people had changed behaviours as a result of COVID, such as shifting towards self-care and digital health. (Also see "[Coronavirus Pandemic Shifting UK Consumer Attitudes To Self-Care](#)" - HBW Insight, 22 Jul, 2020.) So that was very positive. I've personally collaborated closely, on behalf of PAGB and the industry as a whole, with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency - on Brexit, for example. Coming from a regulatory background gave me an opportunity to help because a lot of it was very technically nuanced. I understood the issues and was able to look for solutions as well. So, it has been exciting. Operationally, PAGB was able to go online very quickly and run all of our industry workshops remotely. In the first two weeks we were thinking, "Oh, it's all going to get back to normal before too long". When we realised it was all ongoing, we just shifted everything over.

Q How responsive were the relevant government departments to the specific concerns of UK self-care industry?

A It's been absolutely fantastic actually. As I've already mentioned, the DHSC were very open and very collaborative with regards to Brexit and genuinely wanted industry's input. We continue to work well with the MHRA, on both Brexit and COVID-19 issues, together with the DHSC and also separately. We were impressed with how quickly the MHRA started implementing regulatory flexibility, when the equivalent authorities in the EU were only just looking at it. The MHRA was ahead of any other regulator in the world that I knew of and got the information out there very quickly. At the beginning of the pandemic in the UK, PAGB and other trade associations were having bi-weekly meetings, sometimes weekly meetings, with the MHRA. The MHRA

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With regards to Brexit, there's been ongoing collaboration with the MHRA. As well as raising industry concerns, we have also been very involved in discussions regarding what should be in the many guidance documents that have been coming out. For example, we worked closely with the MHRA on specific OTC medicines and devices guidance for UK retailers. This document came about as a direct result of PAGB flagging the need to support retailers, having had feedback from members that some UK retailers didn't necessarily understand the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland, for example.

Q How well do you think that the UK self-care industry responded to the challenges of COVID-19? Is there anything that you would do differently?

A I think the industry as a whole was extremely agile at a time when everything was so uncertain and unpredictable. Companies managed to keep the supply of OTC medicines going throughout lockdown, even when there was some panic-buying of medicines just as there was with things like toilet roll and pasta! Self-care has been such a key part of the messaging around how we should all respond to COVID-19, if possible. So the consumer healthcare industry was in the spotlight, with very little notice, and I think has performed extraordinarily well in some very difficult circumstances. More widely, the whole UK life sciences industry stepped up to the

plate, manufacturing diagnostic tests for COVID-19 and, of course, getting the first vaccines approved and rolled out already this year. Again, kudos to the MHRA. It makes you really proud to be a part of the sector. Sometimes the pharmaceutical world can be looked on negatively, and I really hope that this has helped show all the good things that we stand for.

Q As well as the coronavirus pandemic, the UK self-care industry had to deal with Brexit, with the UK finally leaving the European Union on 1 January. What does the post-Brexit landscape look like from an industry point-of-view now?

A Firstly, it was great that an agreement was finally reached. That was really, really positive and a big relief to me and all of our member companies. Although medicines aren't subject to tariffs in the first place, some of the other products that our companies produce, for example food supplements and medical devices, would have been subject to tariffs if there had been a no free trade agreement. So, ensuring that tariff free trade is really important. Secondly, it's positive that Good Manufacturing Practice inspections will be mutually recognized, which is a significant advantage for the pharmaceutical industry. It means that manufacturing facilities producing for EU countries that have been inspected by the MRHA don't need to be re-inspected by the European authorities. So that's a big relief because that's a lesser burden on the industry. The area that we would have liked to have seen more progress on was a wider mutual recognition agreement (MRA) for quality control (QC) testing. This remains an area of concern to us and something that we still need to look at and address. (Also see "[UK Consumer Health Industry 'Relieved' By Post-Brexit Deal](#)" - HBW Insight, 6 Jan, 2021.)

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Currently, as of 1 January 2023, any product coming in from the EU needs to be QC tested and batch released. That's something we don't support and we were hoping for an MRA to solve that issue for us. So, that's an area of disappointment and something that we need to look at, regroup on and decide how we want to move forward on. The Northern Ireland Protocol also remains a work in progress. We've got the phased implementation of some of the regulatory flexibilities until the end of this year, which is really good because that gives all of the companies a chance to adjust and ensure the integrity of supply chains to Northern Ireland. But we still need to find out how the actual logistics of all of this will work. So, there is still work involved in that for us as we move forward. But overall, it's positive.

Q Do you think that the supply chains will hold up under the dual pressure of COVID and Brexit as we move into another national lockdown in the UK?

A Our members have prepared in the same way as all the rest of the pharmaceutical industry, in line with government recommendations, to make stockpiling a key part of Brexit contingency plans, and where possible, to have six weeks stock on UK soil. So at the moment, things are looking okay and we don't see any issues arising.