

Sharon Teversham, founder of Azela Health, brings hope to motor neuron disease patients with breakthrough treatment

 By [Katja Hamilton](#)

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Motor neuron disease (MND) refers to a group of progressive neurological disorders that affect the motor neurons, which are nerve cells responsible for controlling voluntary muscle movement.



Source: Sharon Teversham, founder of Azela Health.

These diseases lead to the degeneration and eventual death of motor neurons, resulting in muscle weakness, wasting, and difficulties with speech, swallowing, and breathing. The most well-known form of motor neuron disease is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. MND is a debilitating and currently incurable condition that requires comprehensive medical care and support.

Sharon Teversham, founder and managing director of Azela Health, a proudly South African company, has been instrumental in bringing Glutamed ND to the market together with Swiss-based Rigicare.

Comprising a combination of clinically researched nutrients that have been combined to give sufferers hope, Glutamed ND is a medical nutrition product that promises much hope for patient management of motor neuron disease.

"Motor Neuron Disorder patients are looking for the best combination of interventions for managing this devastating condition. New treatments are very promising but very costly and clearly unaffordable for many MND patients, especially those in lower socio-economic regions," says Teversham. "This limits access to these products severely, excluding patients from obtaining the best potential help. Now we have a cost-effective solution thanks to local production at optimal standards."

Here Teversham tells us more about her rise from pharmacist to entrepreneur, and the breakthrough product that's bringing new hope to MND sufferers, their loved ones, and caregivers.

■ ***Could you tell me a little bit about your career as a pharmacist and how you came to found Azela Health? What is Azela Health's role? When was it founded and how did you come to partner with Swiss-based medical research company, Rigicare?***

I entered the pharma industry early in my career as a medical rep. I needed a well-paying job and a car, as I had to support my husband, who went back to university to study medicine. I soon moved on to open an aseptic compounding facility for Adcock Ingram in Cape Town, where we prepared IV feeds, known as TPN (Total Parenteral Nutrition) for hospitals, and so began my journey in the field of clinical nutrition.

I started my first company a few years later, initially as a competitor in the IV nutrition space, which proved tricky, due to a lack of alternative product supply. Seeking alternatives, I met my now partner, Jørgen Thorball at a clinical-nutrition congress in Stockholm, where he was launching Reuterina, a product he played a vital role in developing for Swedish company BioGaia.

We both came from a similar IV nutrition background and fortunately for me, he decided to take a chance and back 'a dark horse', so to speak.



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I thus secured the distribution rights for the probiotic Reuterina, which we introduced and launched into SA in 2000, along with the probiotic concept - largely unknown locally until then. We had to partner with a larger company to scale the project, and so it was back into corporate.

Jørgen also introduced me to glutamine and it's now well-defined in clinical nutrition.

I finally left the corporate pharma world to start Azela in early 2010, having secured a hospital and state tender distributor agreement for my product Glutamed, which I initially imported. I subsequently sourced the same raw materials myself and found a local producer for the range. Azela has always supplied an oral/enteral option instead of the IV form of glutamine.

Jørgen and I reconnected some four years ago, to further develop the Azela product range. He by now, had also left the corporate pharma world to return to a mix of clinical work, consulting and product development.

■ ***How did you come to have a specific interest in motor neuron disease?***

My interest in motor neuron disease was sparked by Jørgen, who has been researching and developing treatments for neurodegenerative patients, including those with MND for over a decade. He is always on the lookout for the most promising research that can be translated into useful treatments to help his patients suffering from these diseases.

■ ***How many years in the making is Glutamed ND? I hear it's inspired by your current in-hospital range.***

Yes, Glutamed ND was inspired by a combination of factors including our existing range, the trial and subsequent registration of a new drug in Canada and the USA for MND late last year, and by other current promising late-stage MND clinical trials.

■ ***What differentiates it from other products on the market, and what is its role in managing motor neuron disease?***

Glutamed ND is to our knowledge the first clinical nutrition product available worldwide, specifically formulated for patients with neurological diseases. The various compounds in Glutamed ND are intended to reduce inflammation, oxidative stress and the build-up of toxic compounds in the motor neurons, while glutamine is for muscle wasting and to maintain gut mucosal integrity.



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■ ***Is your product available in SA and Africa?***

Yes, it is now available in South Africa and it is our dream to make it available globally.

■ ***How do you hope this new product will transform how MND is managed, and what impact will it have on the quality of life of those incorporating it into their medicine regimens? What has the clinical research on Glutamed ND revealed?***

All MND patients have problems with inflammation, nutrient absorption, aberrations in protein metabolism and a disrupted gut microbiome. We have selected nutrients, shown in current clinical research to be the most promising in addressing these problems. Several ingredients are in fact currently being tested in their own right as treatment modalities in large clinical trials.

■ ***I hear you've started working with the MND Association, could you tell me a little bit about what your collaboration will entail and any projects you're working on together?***

Indeed, I have had the privilege of meeting Sheila Kendal Slabber, the vice-chairperson of the MND Association and her small group of dedicated volunteers, who are shining lights out there.

We hope to leverage our experience in the oncology market, helping patients access Glutamed ORO to aid their recovery, now working towards enabling MND patients to access Glutamed ND with the necessary funding. We have shared our initiatives and my team will be actively assisting in facilitating them.

■ ***If there was one take-away message you wish members of society had about those suffering with MND, what would it be?***

There are many new MND treatments in development, but most are or will be unaffordable. Glutamed ND represents an important step in making such treatments more accessible to all sufferers of neurodegenerative disorders. We are committed to supporting the MND Association and are humbled by their selfless work. This is truly an unmet medical need.

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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