Katharina Gasser – General Manager, Roche Pharma Switzerland



I’m deeply committed to helping shape the future of Switzerland’s healthcare system

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Katharina Gasser of Roche Pharma Switzerland lays out her dedication to fostering innovation, strengthening team dynamics, and influencing the future of Switzerland’s healthcare landscape. Gasser emphasizes the need to combat complacency, advance digitalization, and promote diversity in leadership, noting that "complacency is a real threat—it stifles innovation, diminishes drive, and drains energy."

What inspired your decision to join Roche, and what have been some key experiences during your first two years in this role?

Taking on the role of General Manager for the Swiss affiliate of Roche, a company with a remarkable 128-year legacy, is both an honour and a significant responsibility. In Switzerland, Roche holds a unique position—it’s a name everyone recognizes, whether through personal experiences as a patient, connections with someone employed here, or simply because of the company’s deep roots in the community. This widespread familiarity means my role isn’t just about leading the Swiss affiliate of Roche, but also about embodying the values and standards that have been built over more than a century.

We have to live up to our company’s outstanding reputation every day. Additionally, our recent move to a new building on the Roche campus in December has brought us physically closer to our

global colleagues—those involved in R&D, commercialization, access, finance, and more. This proximity has enhanced our ability to collaborate closely, not just within our local market but also across different countries and global teams. Being part of such a dynamic network, where the focus is on building connections and sharing insights, is both challenging and deeply invigorating.

How is Roche expanding its focus beyond oncology, and what are the implications to take into account for bringing innovative treatments to market in Switzerland?

Roche's legacy in oncology remains strong, but we have significantly broadened our focus to include areas such as neurology, ophthalmology, hemophilia, spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), and hemato-oncology. This expansion not only diversifies our portfolio but also brings new opportunities—new relationships with key opinion leaders (KOLs), new methods of delivering treatments to patients, and fresh perspectives that enhance our work in oncology as well. This cross-pollination between therapeutic areas invigorates our teams, offering them growth opportunities across multiple fields.

As Roche, we are also committed to pioneering new frontiers in healthcare. For example, we have invested many years in Alzheimer's research our resolve to find solutions for this devastating disease remains strong. Additionally, we are making progress in treating rare diseases like Duchenne muscular dystrophy, where no therapies currently exist. Our focus is on addressing high unmet medical needs and advancing innovation in these complex areas.

Regulatory alignment is crucial in swiftly bringing these innovations to market. As Roche, we work closely and collaboratively with regulatory bodies like Swissmedic. We also leverage innovative pathways such as the Access Consortium, a collaborative initiative of like-minded, medium-sized regulatory authorities of Australia, Canada, the UK, Singapore, and Switzerland. This collaboration allows for more efficient review processes, as each agency focuses on specific parts of the dossier. Furthermore, our participation in the FDA's ORBIS initiative for oncology molecules, which allows for parallel submission to the FDA and Swissmedic, significantly accelerates the approval process, ensuring that patients receive timely access to new treatments.

However, one of the biggest challenges we face in Switzerland is reimbursement. The time from approval of a medicine to reimbursement has lengthened considerably, sometimes taking up to 300 days instead of the 60 days fixed in the ordinance. At Roche, we are working diligently to reduce these delays. These systems, which rely on therapeutic cross-comparisons and international price referencing, often fail to account for the true value of innovative treatments like gene

therapies and bispecific antibodies. As a result, this can delay patient access to these groundbreaking therapies.

This situation is particularly troubling when we compare Switzerland to other countries like Germany, where the number of reimbursed molecules is notably higher. This disparity underscores the need for a modernized and flexible reimbursement system that can keep pace with rapid medical advancements. Our primary objective is to ensure that Swiss patients have swift access to the most innovative and effective treatments available.

How does Roche navigate the Swiss healthcare system's reimbursement challenges, especially in light of cost containment pressures?

In Switzerland, our approach at Roche is to avoid over-reliance on managed entry contracts because our primary goal is to ensure that all our molecules achieve swift and full reimbursement on the specialty list. While Article 71 offers a temporary solution for cases where there's a gap between regulatory approval and inclusion on the specialty list, or for specific indications not yet covered, we view this as a bridging measure. We've been proactive in creating frameworks to collaborate with health insurers and the Federal Office of Public Health, focusing on streamlining and digitizing the reimbursement process. However, our main objective remains rapid inclusion on the specialty list. When delays occur, reliance on Article 71 can be extended, which is not ideal.

What we also observe in the Swiss healthcare system is an intense focus on cost containment, particularly concerning medicines. Despite the fact that medicine costs have consistently represented 12 percent of total healthcare spending over many years—unchanged even with demographic shifts and significant innovation—there is persistent pressure to reduce these costs further. We believe this focus is too narrow. While we understand the importance of efficiency and are open to innovative reimbursement models, it's crucial that cost containment efforts also address other areas of healthcare. Digitalization, for example, could significantly enhance efficiency across the entire healthcare system, not just within the pharmaceutical sector.

Japan's experience is instructive—over the past 10 to 15 years, significant cuts in drug spending have led to reduced access to innovative treatments and decreased healthcare investments by biotech and pharma companies. Now, the Japanese government is working to reverse this trend. Unfortunately, we see similar warning signs in Switzerland. Declining reimbursement levels are concerning, particularly in a country with one of the world's best healthcare systems, a strong GDP, and significant wealth. It's vital that we avoid this downward trajectory. This is a matter I am

deeply committed to. We must actively shape our healthcare system to ensure that patients in Switzerland have fast access to innovation, even decades from now. It’s essential that we collaborate to develop sustainable solutions that maintain Switzerland’s reputation as a global leader in healthcare innovation.

Where does Switzerland currently stand in terms of healthcare digitalization, particularly with the growing importance of real-world data in areas like personalized medicine?

Unfortunately, Switzerland’s progress in digitalizing its healthcare system has been slow, placing us on the same level as countries like Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania. In European rankings, Switzerland lags significantly, which is concerning given the potential benefits of digitalization. At Roche, we see immense value in real-world evidence—data collected after clinical trials and regulatory approvals. While clinical trials capture only 2 to 3 percent of the available data, the remaining 98 percent is an untapped resource that could greatly improve patient outcomes and healthcare efficiency.

The current infrastructure in Switzerland is fragmented, lacking the necessary interoperability across different cantons and between the private and public sectors. These systems do not communicate effectively, creating significant barriers to utilizing healthcare data efficiently. We are happy to see that the urgency has been recognised. The Digisanté initiative, led by the Federal Office of Public Health and the Federal Office of Statistics, plans to invest 400 million CHF over the next decade to among other projects build essential digital infrastructure. This is a crucial step, but much more is needed to bring Swiss healthcare digitalization to the level it needs to be.

For patients, access to comprehensive healthcare data could prevent unnecessary procedures, such as redundant blood tests, MRIs and other procedures, and enhance the overall quality of care. For researchers, having this data readily available would accelerate medical advancements. A more digitized healthcare system could also drive significant efficiencies, helping to shape the future of healthcare in Switzerland in such a way that financial sustainability and high quality of care need not be a contradiction in terms.

Roche is deeply committed to advancing this cause. In June, we launched the “Sharing helps cure” initiative to raise awareness about the importance of sharing health data. Through social media and other channels, we aim to build trust and transparency by explaining the various dimensions of digitalization in healthcare and their respective benefits. We are also leading efforts through

Interpharma. I am chairing the Health Data Ecosystem Task Force, where we collaborate with the Federal Office of Public Health and the Swiss Personalized Health Network (SPHN) to drive initiatives and pilot projects aimed at finding practical solutions. With these efforts, we aim to support initiatives such as the aforementioned Digisanté. I very much would like to see Switzerland catch up in terms of digitalization.

What are your objectives for the next two to three years, particularly within the Swiss market?

Over the past two years with Roche's Swiss affiliate, my focus has been on building and strengthening our team and external focus and looking into processes and governance. It's essential to create an environment where our employees feel motivated and committed, especially in the highly competitive pharmaceutical industry. We need to maintain our external focus, ensuring our innovative medicines are recognized for the value they bring, and actively pursue growth opportunities whenever they arise.

However, my ambitions extend beyond business goals. I'm deeply committed to helping shape the future of Switzerland's healthcare system. This involves ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders—ranging from the Federal Office of Public Health and Swissmedic to politicians, hospitals, and healthcare providers. It's crucial that we contribute to the development of a healthcare system that remains forward-thinking and sustainable.

Additionally, ensuring that Switzerland continues to be an attractive environment for investment and economic growth is a priority. I'm actively engaged in economic associations where I advocate for policies that uphold Switzerland's reputation as a hub for innovation and prosperity. Balancing our role as a leading healthcare company with the broader responsibility of supporting Switzerland's economic future is something I take very seriously.

In a stable ecosystem like Switzerland's, how do you prevent complacency and continue to drive innovation?

Complacency is indeed a real threat—it stifles innovation, diminishes drive, and drains energy. At Roche Pharma Switzerland, we are keenly aware of this risk, and as a leadership team, we are committed to challenging ourselves constantly. We regularly review our strategy and have open and good discussions about where we can go beyond what we have already achieved, especially if

we can make a difference for patients. Another key area I’m passionate about is promoting female leadership. While Roche has made significant progress in fostering diversity at all levels, the broader Swiss ecosystem, particularly outside of healthcare, still has much work to do. Even within healthcare, although there have been notable improvements, there’s still more that can be done—especially considering that women make most healthcare decisions, the majority of nurses are women, and there’s a growing number of female physicians.

I believe it’s essential to be actively involved in driving this change, even beyond my role as General Manager. Through my work with various associations, I advocate for greater diversity in leadership across Switzerland. It’s important to help people understand the value of diversity and continue pushing for progress in this area. Although this isn’t part of my daily responsibilities, it’s a cause I’m deeply committed to, and I believe there is still significant room for improvement.

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