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After heading up AstraZeneca Switzerland for one year, Florian Saur reflects on his career journey, discusses the Swiss market and how the country, despite its advanced healthcare and research ecosystem, has fallen behind in terms of access to innovation and digitalization. He shares the ambitious plans to launch 35 new treatments by 2026, discusses reimbursement delays and the "Article 71" regulatory mechanism, and outlines AstraZeneca's renewed and expanded commitment to clinical trials in Switzerland.

What has been your career journey, and how did it lead you to your role at AstraZeneca Switzerland?

My path into healthcare began quite organically, growing up in Germany in a family deeply embedded in the field—my parents owned a pharmacy, and healthcare was a constant part of our lives. Despite this early exposure, I initially sought to chart my own course, studying business with the aim of doing something different. Yet, as I progressed, I came to realize that my passion for healthcare was deeply ingrained, and I felt a strong pull to this industry.

At AstraZeneca, I initially led the Respiratory, Immunology, and Infection business in Germany before transitioning to a global role, where I oversaw the launch of an innovative treatment for asthma and other immunological diseases. In 2023, I took on the role of country president for

AstraZeneca Switzerland.

What has been your experience working in Switzerland, and how would you assess the strengths and challenges of its healthcare system?

This is indeed my first experience working in Switzerland, and I arrived with high expectations, given the country's stellar reputation for healthcare excellence. In many respects, Switzerland lives up to that reputation. The quality of care and ease of access to physicians are impressive, and the research environment is exceptional, supported by leading university hospitals and key opinion leaders across several therapeutic areas.

That said, I have encountered some surprises. One significant area where Switzerland falls behind is in digital healthcare. Despite its overall advanced system, digitalization remains underdeveloped compared to other nations. Another concern is the access to innovative treatments. Switzerland, which once led in this area, is gradually losing its edge. A recent analysis showed that only 48 percent of the medicines approved in Europe in recent years are fully available and reimbursed here. For a country that prides itself on excellence, being ranked sixth in access to innovation is troubling, particularly when compared to Germany, which leads at 87 percent.

As a company focused on innovation, AstraZeneca is dedicated to continuously bringing new therapies to market. From 2024 to 2026, we expect to launch 35 new treatments in Switzerland alone. For this to happen, a healthcare system that values and enables swift access to innovation is essential, though this has proven more challenging than anticipated in such a renowned healthcare market.

How would you assess your first year at AstraZeneca Switzerland?

Despite an in-part shared language with Germany, Switzerland has a distinct and proud culture, which I wanted to understand and embrace before driving change. It was important to strike a balance between understanding local nuances and establishing long-term goals for AstraZeneca Switzerland.

One of my top priorities was to set a clear vision for the future. Together with the management team, we developed a strategic roadmap, which we call the 'Path to 2026.' While achieving immediate financial targets is necessary, I believe it is crucial to provide a longer-term vision that

inspires the organization and helps us focus. Our goals are ambitious—reaching over 300,000 patients and launching 35 new therapies by 2026.

Equally critical is our goal to position AstraZeneca as an employer of choice. While many companies emphasize being a great place to work, our vision goes beyond that. We aim to create a standout environment for people to grow to their full potential and to attract top talent, and so far, the results are encouraging.

How do you navigate the challenges of ensuring timely and broad market access for new therapies?

In Switzerland, market access is fundamentally tied to the country's mandatory health insurance system, making reimbursement critical for any new therapy. If a drug is not reimbursed, it becomes largely inaccessible, as there is not a strong private market for patients to pay out-of-pocket. One unique mechanism that exists here is the so called "Article 71" procedure, which allows for case-by-case reimbursement for treatments that are not yet on the Specialty List (SL) and thus not yet regularly reimbursed. This legal provision is an excellent safety net, enabling patients to access therapies that are either not yet approved or not fully reimbursed. It is a best practice that offers flexibility and should be adopted in other markets.

However, relying on this Article 71 has its limitations. It is a cumbersome process that requires doctors to submit extensive paperwork plus it requires approval from insurers and pharmaceutical companies for each individual case. While this is a great solution for exceptional circumstances, it has increasingly become the norm, particularly in areas like oncology, where innovative treatments often face delays in reimbursement. This process is far from ideal and places unnecessary administrative burden on the healthcare system and risks inequality of access to medicines.

To address this, we need to expand the number of therapies that are regularly reimbursed and reduce the reliance on individual approvals. This is a challenge we are actively working to overcome in order to ensure faster and broader access to new innovations.

How does real-world evidence influence healthcare decisions, and how do you see digitalization impacting Switzerland's healthcare system?

Real-world evidence is vital in shaping healthcare, not only by demonstrating the real-world benefits of innovative therapies but also by offering deeper insights into disease management and patient care. At AstraZeneca, we invest heavily in this area because it allows us to better understand patient pathways and identify gaps in treatment. For example, we are working with a university to explore how adhering to clinical guidelines could reduce avoidable hospitalizations.

However, Switzerland faces challenges in fully capitalizing on real-world evidence, largely due to the slow pace of digitalization. Despite being a small, advanced country, the healthcare system is still lagging in the adoption of digital health solutions. The digitalization of health records has been debated for years, but progress remains limited. Without a robust digital infrastructure, it becomes difficult to effectively collect and utilize real-world data, which in turn delays the ability to translate those insights into improved patient care.

When it comes to reimbursement, real-world evidence plays a surprisingly limited role in Switzerland. The current system is more focused on cost than on the broader benefits of a drug, such as its impact on quality of life or long-term healthcare savings. This creates a disconnection between innovation and access. The industry, including through initiatives like those led by Interpharma, is actively advocating for a modernization of the reimbursement framework to better reflect the true value of innovative therapies.

What role does Switzerland play in AstraZeneca’s clinical trials, and how does this fit with global trends in research?

Switzerland continues to play an important role in AstraZeneca’s clinical trial landscape, and I believe the country itself is equally invested in hosting these trials. With its world-class research institutions and renowned university hospitals, Switzerland offers the ideal environment for driving innovation. Being involved in cutting-edge clinical trials allows these institutions to build expertise, strengthen their global reputation, and remain leaders in medical research.

While there has been a broader decline in clinical trials across Switzerland, driven largely by the issues with digitalization I mentioned and high research costs, AstraZeneca is bucking this trend. Over the past year, we have made a conscious decision to significantly expand our research presence in Switzerland. This decision stems from our recognition of Switzerland as a critical innovation hub, not only for the local market but for our global research efforts as well. Between 2023 and 2024, we anticipate doubling the number of patients participating in our clinical trials in Switzerland, which reflects our renewed commitment to advancing research in this market.

What excites you most about AstraZeneca's future therapies and how are you advancing toward your ambitious goals?

It is challenging to pinpoint a single therapy when so much of our work is transformative across multiple areas. What excites me the most is the ambitious target we have set for ourselves, particularly in oncology, where our goal is nothing less than to eliminate cancer as a cause of death. This is an extraordinary mission, and the progress we are making toward it is incredibly motivating. Of course, achieving market share is important, but what truly drives us is the ability to deliver life-saving outcomes. For example, when we bring a drug to market that significantly reduces mortality, that is where the real excitement lies. In oncology, especially with lung cancer, the earlier we can intervene, the more we improve the chances of turning cancer from a life-threatening condition into something manageable, perhaps even curable in some cases.

Also outside of oncology, we have multiple drugs that have shown to reduce mortality. We also expect to enter the field of amyloidosis, specifically ATTR, a disease that affects the nerves or the heart.. What makes this especially exciting is that our pipeline goes beyond slowing the progression of the disease—we have the potential to bring forward therapies that may one day eliminate it entirely. Knowing that we have these kinds of breakthroughs ahead of us is truly inspiring.

How do you ensure that your teams are fully engaged and aligned with AstraZeneca's mission and how do you retain talent in such a competitive environment?

Switzerland is indeed a fantastic environment to work in, especially in the pharmaceutical sector, where the workforce is highly skilled and deeply experienced. Many of the professionals here have worked for multiple companies in the industry and bring a wealth of knowledge to the table. What I find particularly remarkable is the dedication and passion of our teams. Swiss professionals may not always express their enthusiasm outwardly, but their hard work and commitment speak volumes when they are aligned with a clear purpose.

That is why it is so important for us to clearly communicate our mission and ensure that everyone understands the impact we are striving to make. When people are genuinely connected to that purpose, they go above and beyond to make it happen. What also stands out about AstraZeneca in Switzerland is the diversity we've cultivated. We have over 20 nationalities represented within our

team, and we have made significant strides in gender diversity, with more than 50 percent of leadership roles held by women. We have also been awarded the LGBTI label, reflecting our commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive work environment. The positive feedback we receive from employees about feeling valued and engaged is a testament to the strength of our culture.

Employee retention is not something we focus on as an isolated goal—it is an outcome of building the right work environment. Our main priority is to create a space where people feel empowered to make decisions, collaborate, and thrive within a diverse and inclusive culture. There is clear evidence that diverse teams make better decisions and feel more engaged, and this naturally leads to stronger loyalty. Our high retention rates reflect this approach.

As you look ahead, what is your vision for AstraZeneca in Switzerland, and what would you like to achieve with your team during your time here?

While I cannot say for certain how long I will remain in Switzerland, I have already grown roots in the country, its healthcare system, and its culture. My wife now works here as a dentist, and I am involved locally, and can even call myself a soccer coach now. These personal ties make me feel embedded in Swiss life. Professionally, we have set clear ambitions for 2026, and I am confident we are on a strong path toward achieving them. However, there is more that I aim to accomplish with my time here.

When I first arrived, I assumed Switzerland, with its global pharmaceutical giants, would be highly open to collaboration with the pharma industry. However, I was somewhat surprised to encounter a level of skepticism. There is a perception that pharma operates purely with commercial interests, which can hinder collaboration. Of course, like any business, we must be profitable, but our goals extend far beyond that. At the core, we share the same mission as the healthcare system: to provide the best possible therapies to patients and improve outcomes.

One of my key ambitions is to overcome this skepticism and build deeper collaboration between the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare stakeholders. I am pleased to see that my team shares this commitment. We all believe that true progress in healthcare requires working together, not in isolation. The healthcare landscape is fast-moving and increasingly complex, and the challenges we face are too great to be solved by any one sector alone. We can only accelerate advancements and improve patient care by fostering a more collaborative approach.

If I can contribute to changing the perception of the pharmaceutical industry here and demonstrate that our goals are aligned with those of the broader healthcare system, that would be an achievement I would be proud of. Ultimately, it is about proving that when we unite with a shared purpose, we can deliver better outcomes for patients, which is, and always will be, the ultimate goal.

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