

Interview: Jasper van Grunsven - General Manager, Amgen Netherlands



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Amgen Netherlands is preparing to launch five new products next year, including their leading cardiovascular biotech product Repatha and recently announced the acquisition of the Dutch biotech Dezima. General manager Jasper van Grunsven explains the challenges of preparing for the upcoming year in the midst of structural changes to the healthcare system.

Amgen has just acquired the biotech firm Dezima in one of the biggest acquisitions in the Netherlands this year. What has been the response of your local organization, and how will this development impact Amgen Netherlands' role within Amgen?

This acquisition was very big news in the Netherlands, and our organization is enthusiastic about collaborating with Professor Kastelein and Dezima, but at this point it is really too early to speculate on what this might mean for Amgen in the Netherlands.

It certainly demonstrates our unceasing commitment to the cardiovascular area, which is also reflected in our launch preparations for Repatha, our lead cardiovascular product and the first biologic product in its class.

With five product launches coming up next year, including Amgen's first cardiovascular product, what steps have you taken to prepare and transform your organization?

At the European level, we have engaged in a cross-functional program to enter new therapeutic areas. However, while we were preparing to venture into new areas, we also had to adapt to substantial changes in the local market with changing rules and market structures – a real balancing act!

Given the simultaneity of these two challenges, we carried out a significant change in management program to enable the necessary structural changes within our organization. This program was completed in mid-2015, which allows Amgen today to fully focus on executing product launch operations with maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

These structural changes reflect the new reality of the Dutch market, which increasingly emphasizes regional structures. The Dutch market used to be similar to other European markets where demand is strongly driven by physicians. However, over the last five years healthcare budgets have been restructured such that reimbursement decisions are now taken at the regional or hospital level.

What is your current assessment of the Dutch healthcare system's ability to support patient access to highly innovative medicines?

The Netherlands maintains a strong focus on innovation and is able to support innovation relative to most other markets. Yet, we understand that we need to take appropriate measures to ensure future spending sustainability. The pharmaceutical industry has already made a significant contribution to reducing drug prices, and, as a result, drug expenses have remained fairly flat over the last few years. At present, pharmaceutical spending is well under control at the national level but the allocation of funding across regions has become problematic in some instances. For example, since reimbursement decisions are now delegated downwards, physicians are under pressure to limit prescriptions of expensive drugs. Therefore, access to these treatments becomes inconsistent, and this is my primary concern. Market access in general is slowing down due to increasingly unpredictable and complex systems. This results in access limitations or might even result in denied access to certain high-risk products until additional studies have been conducted. While industry professionals recognize that these budgetary pressures influence treatment decisions, this issue has not been addressed on a political level.

Our main concern is that changes are introduced too quickly, and we strongly hope that in the future the Netherlands will give more consideration to ensuring consistent access to innovative medicines across regions. Looking ahead, we will have to continue to collaborate to ensure sustainable spending methods policies, especially given the wave of upcoming biological product

launches.

In this context, how important do you feel innovative and creative financing models will be going forward?

Innovative and creative financing models will be extremely important. However, to ensure their sustainability, we must ensure that we have the right structures in place. With a healthy national budget but regional access problems, there is still a need for the current structures to be modified to ensure an efficient and appropriate allocation of funds. Once this issue is resolved, we want to be part of the conversation around innovative pricing models, especially considering our pipeline of innovative products. Furthermore, we are working with all stakeholders involved to ensure effective and fair access for those patients that need and can benefit from these very significant innovations.

What sets Amgen apart from more traditional pharmaceutical companies, and distinguishes Amgen Netherlands in particular?

Our position as a leading biotech company is strongly based on our organization's strength and identity at the global level. We are one of the largest biotech companies in the world, and our leadership clearly mirrors in the innovations we bring to the global market. Next year, we will be launching the first cardiovascular biotech product, as well as two new products in hema-oncology with truly innovative modes of action. Amgen has pioneered R&D techniques through our collaboration with deCODE in Iceland, developing new therapies that target patient populations with specific genes. We have made significant innovations on the manufacturing side creating new, highly flexible production platforms as demonstrated by our plant in Singapore.

In terms of our contribution to society, we are making significant efforts to help improve healthcare spending sustainability through the development of our biosimilars portfolio.

The Dutch affiliate already plays a strong role in the global Amgen network and we have always been seen as an innovative and pioneering affiliate. We try to find new ways to bring products to the market and showcase the strong ability to adapt to market changes. Furthermore, within Amgen we are leaders in terms of integrating value-based healthcare concepts into our strategy. While this is not unique within Amgen or within the Netherlands, we have an amazing and state-of-the-art team, one that is worthy of recognition within any context.

As the leading biotech, what is your message to the emerging biotechs in the Netherlands?

Ten years ago, the Netherlands did not have a strong biotech climate. The types of innovation that emerge in companies like Dezima clearly demonstrate that times have changed. The Dutch innovation ecosystem is very active at the moment and as a part of the community and a member of Nefarma and HollandBIO, we take our responsibility to support the local efforts with our capabilities in IT, logistics, advice, and even investment, very seriously. Moreover, as global leaders we do our utmost to support the innovative climate as a whole. Given recent successes, my message to the local biotech scene is “please continue doing what you are doing” because there will surely be exit opportunities and continued successes if the Dutch life sciences industry maintains its current course.

Looking at the five-year horizon, where would you like to take Amgen Netherlands by 2020?

Our ambition is to take a stronger leadership role in the Dutch market than we already have. We are currently number 12 in the specialty market, and we aim to solidly be in the top 10 within the next few years. Another ambition is to be recognized as a company that embodies the value-based healthcare concept in our strategy and organization by not only adding value with products, but also across the full patient treatment pathway and value chain. If we have established a position where we are recognized and valued as a partner truly embracing this approach, this will be a big step towards where we should be.

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