Interview: Vojtěch Mészáros – Executive Director, Egis Praha, Czech Republic

17.05.2016

Tags: Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, Egis, Praha, Czech, Vojtěch Mészáros, Biosimilar, Biotech, Pricing, price Pressure, Strategy, Interview, Insight, Exclusive, Executive, Free

Vojtěch Mészáros, Executive Director of Egis Praha, speaks about his background in the industry, his drive to promote biosimilar products, and how the company maneuvers around the growing price pressures in the market.

You hold an impressive profile in the pharmaceutical industry. Please introduce your background and leadership to our international readers.

I have been in the pharmaceutical industry since 1996. My career path has been shaped by two major companies: Firstly, I worked for Bristol Myers-Squibb, where I had my start as a pharmaceutical representative and moved to become a Product Manager thereafter. Secondly, I worked for Fournier Pharmaceuticals, originally as a Marketing Manager and then moved to become the General Manager for Slovakia. With the latter, I had the opportunity to be involved in an international project in Canada, which was a great learning experience for me. In 2005, I joined Egis Praha and was appointed as General Manager for Czech Republic. After a few years, the operational structure shifted to integrate Slovakia, which therefore broadened my responsibilities to both countries. My main responsibility at that time was to rebuild the strategic focus in Slovakia as 2007 was a year when the market faced plenty of pricing struggles and our brand portfolio was put under strong pressure.

In essence, the scope of my responsibilities today range from business development projects to investment opportunities from an executive mindframe. In Czech Republic specifically, I make decisions regarding the company's operational strategies for growth. In 2013, Egis Plc was fully acquired by Servier Group and we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the company's existence.

Having met with the Executive Director of the CAFF, Martin Mátl, it has come to light that biosimilars have a growing presence in the Czech Market. A recent study done by the CAFF, in collaboration with IMS Health, regarding how biosimilars are perceived by medical practitioners in the country has driven largely positive results. What do you believe the main implications will be of this perception in the Czech market?

The emergence and growing appreciation for biosimilar products in the recent years is indicative of the imminent shift that is currently happening in the market at the global scale. From our company's vantage point, the growing presence of biosimilars is a testament to the important milestones in the development of Egis in the Czech Republic. Some years ago, we signed a contract with a South Korean company acquiring the rights for the sales and marketing of biosimilar products. We thoroughly prepared ourselves to launch these products in 2013 in Czech Republic, yet it was still fairly uncertain as to how to the market will behave, especially in terms of the reception of the healthcare community and medical practitioners towards them. At that time, biosimilar products had already been approved by the FDA and European Union, yet it was still imperative for us to create a strong PR campaign in order to persuade all of the stakeholders in the industry, as well as the general public, that biosimilars are formidable revenue drivers to finance the healthcare budget.

"Health. Quality. Life" is the main mantra of Egis and we stood firm in our stance that launching biosimilar products is an ideal approach to cater to our market at a quality high caliber. Additionally, this strategy was also the means for us to help provide support to the government in sustainably financing the healthcare landscape as a whole, having sought interdisciplinary cooperation from the Ministry of Health, different health insurance funds, as well as medical professionals in establishing a viable presence for biosimilar products in the market.

The launch was a rather challenging feat, yet there was little resistance in pushing our initiative forward. Despite fears surrounding the novelty of biosimilars, major concerns were readily pacified once studies regarding their efficacy were highlighted in our promotional efforts. Studies have shown efficient treatments in the field of rheumatology, as well as gastroenterology through the basis of extrapolation. In addition, these treatments have been approved by the European Medical Association, thus giving more credence to the products. Emphasizing the importance of education

through high-level seminars and discussion forums was a key factor for persuasion for medical professionals, as well as opening the mindsets of the general public for these products through emphasizing the advantages in costs and availability. For the latter, we are still in the midst of our efforts to grow the volume of biosimilar products in the market because it is still rather low (especially in comparison to Germany, Austria, and Hungary), yet there has been a steady increase in demand. One of the main hindrances for this situation is the level of reimbursement received by the patients given the budget and criteria for biosimilar products, thus prompting us to ensure that we offer favorable conditions for our products.

Your main biosimilar product, Remsima, is renowned as the world's first biosimilar antibody. Where does it stand today in the Czech market?

In 2015, Remsima was defined by the IMS as one of biggest new products in the market. For all the launches in the Czech market from 2013, Remsima was ranked among Top Five, thus solidifying our stance as a viable competitor in the market. Currently there has been over one thousand patients treated with Remsima, making us one of the most respected players in the biosimilar market in the country. This product, in fact, has now been the main driver for growth in the company for the past few years.

Egis is also heavily investing in the research and development of added-value generic products. Despite our strong interest in the biosimilar market, our portfolio largely remains broad. Another business avenue is the sale of licenses to other companies, generating growth levels of approximately 25 percent, as well a turnover of more than EUR 20 million (USD 22.7 million) in the Czech market.

In regards with research and development, Egis recently opened a Center of Science and Technology in Budapest, commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the company. What is the overall contribution of the Czech operations in terms of R&D capabilities?

The Czech R&D activities are mostly centered on biological clinical studies. Aside from the Center of Science and Technology opened in Budapest, the 100-year mark was also celebrated through the opening of the Biological Business Unit. The bulk of clinical studies related to Remsima and gastroenterology are mostly handled by the Hungarian operations, whereas registry studies regarding biologicals are held also in the Czech Republic. These are typically retrospective studies regarding how patient react to treatments under normal conditions. Today, there are also two additional studies coordinated by Celltrion Healthcare.

Celltrion Healthcare has a strong partnership with Egis for distribution in the CEE region. What do you believe makes Egis the ideal partner, especially for a biopharmaceutical company such as Celltrion?

The strength of our partnership predominantly roots from the fact the both organizations believed in the concept of biosimilars. The market landscape as a whole held a strong sense of skepticism towards biosimilars some years ago. Thus, our partnership was forged in the commonality of our beliefs that biosimilars will have a relevant impact on the market. Additionally, Egis is a well-established company in Russia and the CIS region, which further facilitated the collaboration amongst our organizations.

The two-tier referencing system in the Czech healthcare landscape has created price pressures for many companies operating in the country. How does Egis navigate these conditions?

Maneuvering this reality is an inevitable challenge for any company operating in the Czech Republic. The means in which we counteract this challenge is to ensure that we provide value-added products that are high in quality and innovative. We also aim to cater to new areas and launch therapeutic treatments for different conditions in order to create opportunities that do not carry the same intensity in price pressures.

In which areas do you believe Egis brings the most value to patients?

Our fundamental belief in the principle of biosimilar products was an innovative approach of our corporate culture that helped drive our growth. Moreover, we also believe in heavily investing in Central and Eastern Europe, especially for research and development in which we dedicate 10% of our turnovers. Each year, we aim to provide new formulas and other product lines to the market. The main therapeutic areas in our portfolio are in cardiology and metabolic products, but we constantly strive to enlarge this repertoire through biosimilars and gynecological products. In essence, our overarching goal is to provide the most affordable treatments for our patients.

Click here to read more articles and interviews from the Czech Republic, and to download the latest free pharma report on the country.

See more interviews