# Interview: Michaela Hrdlickova – Country Director, Biogen, Czech Republic



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*Michaela Hrdlickova of Biogen elaborates on how it is the industry's responsibility to educate all stakeholders within the Czech Republic in order to embed a health consciousness in every individual and discusses the unique referencing methods applied in the country and their resulting challenges for both industry and patient.*

**When we met you in 2012, you said that education of the different stakeholders in the Czech Republic is of the utmost significance. Is this still a hot topic today?**

Educating the different stakeholders is of utmost significance for everybody, as well as for the industry! I engage in educating the stakeholders mainly through my position within the AIFP, the local trade association of the innovative pharmaceutical industry. It's my fifth consecutive year as vice president and as such, I am leading the working group for innovation within the association. Our main goal is to promote the value of innovative drugs and improve the image of the industry via more information. It really is unfair that the industry's image is quite negative as no other industry is contributing so much to quality of life in general! Not only for the patients, but also in the extended perception taking in account their families and loved ones. The government is definitely benefiting as well; when people are healthy they can contribute to society, work longer, and pay taxes. The major challenge in all of Europe is its aging population, if social security systems are to function in the future, then people will have to work longer. Of course, this

challenge is very complex and depends not only on the population's health; nonetheless health is an integral part of finding a pan-European solution! The innovative pharmaceutical industry contributes to solving this issue, given that diagnoses are made at an early enough stage, and through different initiatives to enhance prevention coming from the industry.

**In this context, do the relevant regulatory authorities recognize and appreciate the value of innovative treatments?**

Yes. I have witnessed changes for the better in recent years. During these years access to innovative treatments has improved significantly, especially thanks to strategic changes in the approach of payers. The reports of the health insurance companies show that biological treatments are growing — undoubtedly through its centralized approach of bundling expertise in specialized treatment hubs within the Czech Republic. Additionally, healthcare budgets today are in relatively better shape than they were years ago when I started; although biological treatments are by nature of their development associated with high price, buyers are continuously seeking ways to afford these treatments for patients.

**How do you assess the potential of biosimilars for Biogen's operations in the Czech Republic?**

Biosimilars are definitely a business opportunity for us, they're even produced in the same manufacturing plant as the originals. I have heard about positive results in rheumatology; however I am not directly in charge of our biosimilars segment. Nonetheless, I do identify a tremendous franchise opportunity here! As a company, it is great to have such a large product portfolio and innovate as frequently as we do, however, we also have to take the perspective of our stakeholders into consideration; which is that for them it is a challenge to financially keep up with all the innovation coming. Biosimilars play a crucial role of keeping the balance, bringing benefits to patients and buyers alike. Biosimilars will enable patients to access continuous treatment while freezing up finances for new innovative treatment—a win-win situation!

[Featured_in]

**The Czech Republic has a unique combination of referencing methods, resulting in some of the lowest drug prices in Europe. How do you navigate through this price pressure?**

This is an issue we're often discussing within the innovators' association, as the price pressure is becoming more and more complicated. Innovation has a price which reflects the cost of clinical studies and developing sophisticated treatments. I don't think it is a good solution to put innovative

treatments in a reference basket which sometimes references with treatments it shouldn't be compared to. Especially Biogen is reinvesting a significant amount of revenue back into R&D and such reference systems are not appreciating the innovation efforts made. From discussions with my industry peers, I know that some of them experience significant challenges in product launches due to the referencing countries and referenced therapeutic area.

**The ministry of health recently issued the national strategy of health 2020, how can pharmaceutical companies help in the ministries plans to develop the overall health outcome of the Czech Healthcare system?**

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I personally see our industry contributing through our association. One way is the education of all stakeholders including the general public, especially on prevention and the establishment of a health consciousness in the individual. We've already made some achievements: an online tool for patients to re-check prescriptions to assess possible drug interactions and a brochure about the challenge of the aging population, spread among politicians and decision makers, including economic considerations and implications surrounding the current healthcare system. As I know the Czech Republic currently doesn't have a strong and solid strategy directed at the aging population, it was mentioned that in a few years the healthcare system will have challenge to finance health care system to stay in current positive situation. Education is the key to solve the puzzle of different interests among the stakeholders, as it allows the individual to gain the perspective of the complete picture and it is our responsibility as industry to act towards achieving this goal! Additionally, we need to promote innovation, explain its benefits –medically and economically speaking— thus generally establishing the knowledge surrounding its added value to society at large.

Another accomplishment I'm particularly proud of is the development of what we call the "academia of patients." Many patient groups were working independently and not all of them on a professional level – and it is clear that a common vision and goal exists in this area. Our goal was to support these patient organizations to become unified, but also act independently from grants for funding. So, we developed a concept of an "Academy" for patient organization. We helped facilitate the formation of this academy, and this provided a forum for patient groups to interact together independently, and discuss key issues and challenges together. Where appropriate, we also provided guidance on capacity building – for example, we shared some best practices for fundraising that could help them maintain their programs, and also their independence! Today, it is officially appreciated by the ministry of health. I'm pleased that this model of how patients

can—and should be—organized is inspiring patient organizations in some other countries around Czech Republic!

**What does Biogen's slogan, 'caring deeply changing life,' mean to you?**

Changing the life of patients by bringing them the best, safest and most effective treatment thus improving their life and the lives of their families. Especially in MS where mainly young women are diagnosed it means to help them to stay healthy and independent from their disease for as long as possible so they can care for their children and life a normal life.

**Where will you be in 2020?**

I hope I will be one of Biogen's employees, bringing the treatment to improve the lives of patients with neurodegenerative and rare diseases and MS.  In addition, I would like to utilize my long experience as a business woman. As a part of my social responsibility activities I had the chance to take part in a mentoring program for young women at the beginning of their careers and I was delighted to have this opportunity to pass on my knowledge and experience. It is important to understand that management and leadership are not the same! To become an authentic leader, one needs empathy, energy, listening skills, and the ability to minimize the ego; thus accepting others how they are. In my opinion, these characteristics are rather more common in women than in men. Some managers still utilize their employees for their own career purposes and I despise this behavior. These people are not leaders, leaders are there for their people and do everything to make them stronger and motivated, which ultimately will be beneficial for the company! I think bosses who are not focusing on developing their people and making positive environment in the work place do not support the successful future of their company.

Additionally, I want to pass on my experience about maintaining a healthy work life balance; it is important, that in the end your life wasn't all about your career, money and working twenty hours a day, and for that you need to be disciplined and take time for yourself!

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