Interview: Carolin Hillebrand – Country Manager, Neurim Pharmaceuticals Switzerland



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03.10.2016

Tags: Switzerland, Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, Neurim, Insomnia, Market Access

Carolin Hillebrand, country manager of Neurim Pharmaceuticals Switzerland, a neuroscience specialty company, discusses the launch of their lead product Circadin, the only IP-protected product providing a prolonged release formulation of melatonin for insomnia.

Neurim Pharmaceuticals is an Israeli company focused on CNS, with a second office in Switzerland. Could you start by introducing the company to our international readers?

Neurim Pharmaceuticals belongs to the RAD Group: a high-tech group specializing in data communication and biotech companies, some of which are privately owned, and some of which are traded. The Group is active in around 160 countries, employing 4,400 people, with a turnover of USD 1.2 billion. Neurim Pharmaceuticals was founded in 1991 by Professor Nava Zisapel, a recognized neuroscientist, and the entrepreneur and businessman Mr. Yehuda Zisapel, founder and president of the RAD Group and chairman of Rad-Biomed, a biomedical start-up incubator. Nava Zisapel acts as the chief scientific officer for Neurim Pharmaceuticals today, and is also a professor at Tel-Aviv University. Neurim Pharmaceuticals was founded in Tel-Aviv, which remains the location of our headquarters today.

Neurim Pharmaceuticals stands out for its expertise on Neuroscience. Professor Zisapel is an exceptional scientist, with a solid network, and both the technologies and the resources to invent products from the early stages of development to commercialization. Our first product to have

been launched on the market is called Circadin, the only IP-protected product providing a prolonged release of melatonin treatment for insomnia. Insomnia is a huge issue in today's society, in particular among the elderly population. There is a tremendous unmet medical need among elderly patients suffering from insomnia. Professor Zisapel saw a connection between the age related decline in melatonin, and non-restorative sleep in elderly patients. Melatonin is a substance that the body produces naturally. It was her vision to treat patients with a melatonin formulation that mimics the body's secretion profile in order to improve the sleep profile and improve people's quality of life. It is particularly challenging to ensure that products actually improve sleep without impairing next day performance within the insomnia market. This is one of Circadin's major strengths.

What contribution has Switzerland made to the development of Neurim Pharmaceuticals?

Switzerland has played an important role in the development of Neurim Pharmaceuticals. Indeed, it explains why Switzerland is our only office beyond Israel. In the initial development of Circadin, Neurim Pharmaceuticals' R&D team collaborated with Professor Anna Wirz-Justice at the renowned Centre for Chronobiology, one of the leading centers in the world for melatonin research, based in Basel. Together they worked on a controlled release of melatonin and analyzed its effect on body temperature control and behavioral aspects. Today our formulations are still developed in Switzerland and one of our global manufactures is located here. Neurim Pharmaceuticals has always had an excellent exchange of ideas with world known experts on melatonin and sleep in the University of Basel, collaborating on a number of initiatives.

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Today, part of our global business development is conducted from Zug. In this regard, we are actively looking for partners for commercialization of our pipeline products. In the future, we also have ambitions to promote in-licensed products in Switzerland.

In 2010 you became country manager of Neurim Pharmaceuticals Switzerland, with the responsibility for setting up the marketing and sales office locally. What have been the key milestones for the affiliate over the last six years?

Indeed, when I joined Neurim Pharmaceuticals in 2010, one of the priorities was building up our sales and marketing organization in Switzerland from scratch. This required a high level of focus alongside a broad knowledge of the industry. You have to be a generalist, taking strategic decisions while also being hands-on, so as to move the business forwards. Developing the market

and sales side of our business remains an important part of my job today. My second major priority area was to ensure the successful launch of Circadin. This is not a me-too product. It has certain key attributes, such as improving the quality of life for people with insomnia. This novel mode of action required a lot of awareness raising and educational initiatives.

Circadin was approved by the European Commission in 2007, and today is commercially available in Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. How has this product been received in the Swiss market?

Circadin is available, through strategic partnerships, in over 45 countries across the world. Today it is commercially available across five continents. The reception of the product in Switzerland has been excellent. Indeed, this is reflected through our double-digit growth. Improving the quality of sleep is an important factor in one's overall wellbeing. It is not the quantity of sleep that matters, but the quality of sleep. Insomnia is a 24-hour problem. When you sleep well, you will then perform better the next day. This is one of Circadin´s core attributes. The drug also has an excellent safety profile. Elderly patients often suffer from comorbidities. They take several drugs at the same time, and have to be careful of the various combinations. Through clinical studies, it has been proven that Circadin does not impact issues such as impairment in motor-function and memory loss.

What is the prevalence of insomnia in Switzerland, a country well-known for having an ageing population?

According to the ministry of statistics (BFS), nearly one in three people aged over 55 suffer from some form of Insomnia. It is rather omnipresent within the elderly population. However, in today's non-stop world, insomnia is also present among younger people, although statistically the severity and the frequency of insomnia increases with age.

Alongside Circadin, Neurim also has a promising pipeline within Central Nervous System disorders. What particular products do you expect to launch in the coming years that will drive your growth?

Following on from the prolonged release melatonin formulation found within Circadin, Neurim is now conducting a Phase III clinical study with Pediatric PRM minitablets for the treatment of sleep disorders in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Our R&D team developed this product because there was an urgent unmet medical need in the market. As of today there is no approved insomnia treatment available for these vulnerable children. The company's lead drug candidate Piromelatine (Neu-P11) is a novel compound under development for sleep and cognition in Insomnia and Alzheimer's Disease. Another compound for neuropathic pain is expected to reach

first in human stage in the near term. We still very much believe in the tremendous potential of Circadin, and try to develop the medical breakthrough into different fields where it could be of benefit to patients.

Neurim Pharmaceuticals has strategic alliances with Big Pharma companies, including the likes of Teva and Takeda. How important are such partnerships to your business model?

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Strategic partnering is at the heart of our business model. Our core competency, as a smaller company, is to develop drugs, and then bring them through until market authorization. But we also understand when it is necessary to work with strong partners, to ensure that our treatments are available to the maximum number of patients globally. As a company that is still in the building process, we cannot strive to be experts in all fields. The team led by Adi Zisapel (CCO) at Neurim Pharmaceuticals has done a tremendous job in identifying partners with compatible capabilities, defining mutual goals, in order to form win-win situations. The numerous well-established partners that we work with, only serves to enhance our reputation, as a trusted partner with a good product profile.

What will be your key goals for Neurim Pharmaceuticals in Switzerland over the next five years?

Within the next few years one of our key goals is to ensure Circadin is available to all patients in need in Switzerland. This will be a key driver for our business. My second priority will be to take Neurim Pharmaceuticals Switzerland to the next level, building a sustainable future for the affiliate. We will do this by successfully marketing our new product pipeline, while continuing to grow our current product on the market, Circadin, and lastly by in-licensing certain products that complement our existing portfolio.

Before joining Neurim Pharmaceuticals in 2010, you had worked for two of the most distinguished Big Pharma companies in the world, in BMS and Biogen. What was it that attracted you to the Neurim Pharmaceuticals project?

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work in different departments and in different fields. I have gained experience in medical affairs teams, alongside exposure to marketing and sales. I have acquired a broad experience; and the opportunity to build something from scratch with Neurim Pharmaceuticals Switzerland really excited me. I like to be hands-on, and have the freedom to create something which I can one day look back on with pride. There is nothing more

rewarding than contributing to the overall wellbeing of patients. Having the opportunity to transform Neurim Pharmaceuticals into a trusted partner among the key stakeholders within the Swiss healthcare industry is extremely gratifying.

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