Interview: Dr. André T. Dahinden – General Manager Switzerland, Head of Immuno-Oncology Business Unit Europe, Amgen



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Dr. André T. Dahinden, General Manager of Amgen Switzerland, talks about their four cutting-edge products that will help drive future growth, reveals how being innovative includes partnering with payers for improved pricing models, and why the Swiss healthcare environment is like the Swiss railway system: well organized, punctual and reliable.

In July this year, Amgen released its second quarter results for 2016, with revenues increasing an impressive 6 percent versus the second quarter of 2015 to $5.7 billion. What particular products have been driving your growth in Switzerland?

Amgen is a global leader in the field of biotechnology and is in the process of launching four novel medicines in Switzerland, the first of which is in the cardiovascular setting. For the last 20 years, statins have been the drug of choice to treat low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, or bad cholesterol. High levels of 'bad' cholesterol in the blood greatly increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. Every year there are over 20,000 deaths due to cardiovascular disease in Switzerland alone, generating additional health care costs exceeding USD 10 bn. With the launch of Repatha® Amgen offers an important and innovative treatment option for very high-risk and familial hypercholesterolemia patients with uncontrolled cholesterol who require a medication to lower 'bad' cholesterol (or LDL-C) levels after statins.

We are also launching Kyprolis® for use in combination treatment of patients with relapsed multiple myeloma. Multiple myeloma is a rare, aggressive and complex blood cancer. In Europe, more than 24,000 people in Europe die of multiple myeloma every year, and 55% of multiple myeloma patients don't survive past five years from diagnosis. People with multiple myeloma suffer from recurring remission and relapse. Every time a patient has a relapse it makes it harder for treatments to work. The exact cause of multiple myeloma is unknown and symptoms often don't occur until the disease is more advanced, making an early diagnosis difficult.

And then we have the first Bispecific T cell Engager (BiTE®) antibody construct product approved in Europe. BiTE® antibodies represent an innovative immunotherapy approach that helps the body's immune system target cancer cells. It is used in our product BLINCYTO®, which treats adults with Philadelphia chromosome-negative (Ph-) relapsed or refractory B-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), a rare and rapidly progressing cancer of the blood and bone marrow. Prognosis is poor for adult patients with ALL who are refractory to treatment or experience relapse. BLINCYTO® is the first major advance in more than two decades for patients with this hard-to-treat cancer. BLINCYTO® is a new and innovative approach that helps the body's own immune system fight cancer.

Another new drug, targeting metastatic melanoma, is called IMLYGIC®. Metastatic melanoma is a complex disease to treat, particularly in the advanced stages, where survival rates remain low. IMLYGIC® provides a new treatment option to patients with early metastatic disease. IMLYGIC® is derived from the herpes simplex type 1 virus (HSV-1), commonly called the cold sore virus, and it is designed to cause the death of tumor cells and initiate an anti-tumor immune response.

Amgen also has a legacy portfolio of leading drugs that continue to drive our growth, including Prolia®, XGEVA®, and Vectibix®. It is alongside such products that we launch our four new cutting-edge products that I mentioned.

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One of the particularities of the Swiss market, being outside of the European Union (EU), is that it possesses its own separate and distinctive regulatory framework, which entails different dossier filings and price negotiations to EU member states. How does this separate system affect your market access strategy?

Like any country, Switzerland needs to manage its funds; we have a population that demands access to the latest innovative drugs. We engage with the Federal Office of Public Health to demonstrate the value of our medicines to ensure they reach the people who need them. We focus

on providing great value, addressing unmet medical needs, providing new treatment options for doctors at a price that is acceptable for the population. Amgen recognizes that healthcare systems have finite resources and aims to be an ‘incubator’ for innovative approaches to pricing, reimbursement and access.

Switzerland is a key location for Amgen’s clinical research. What particular advantages does Switzerland have as a clinical research environment when compared to other highly developed markets?

Switzerland is a small country, with a proportionally dense number of high quality institutes in Zurich, Basel and Geneva all quite close to each other, ensuring an easy sharing of knowhow and expertise between these institutes. These high quality institutes attract high quality researchers from around the world. Switzerland also has an efficient and stable legal system, and it is easy to collaborate with different stakeholders. The country is innovation prone: the population, patients and doctors all demand access to innovation. Switzerland is ranking on top of the Innovation Index. This is a particularly healthy mix, which provides a good environment for recruiting patients into highly complex clinical trials.

Amgen is looking to grow its biosimilars franchise globally. Switzerland is a very specific case in Europe, having a particularly low generic penetration and less pressure on pricing. Will such an environment have any impact on the development of the biosimilars market in the country?

Indeed, the Swiss market, as one that is innovation driven, has not yet seen a high penetration of generics. Biosimilars is an emerging area. Today, many of the strongest players in the area of biologics are entering the field of biosimilars, and as one of the leading biotechnology companies in the world, Amgen is no exception. Biosimilars have the potential to bring increased access of our medicines to a broader patient population. The debate around quality in the biosimilars arena will become very important in the future. Because biosimilars are so difficult to develop, manufacturers will need to have significant biologics expertise, infrastructure and capital investment to successfully bring these medicines to market. That is why we at Amgen have committed the best scientists and the necessary investments to produce reliably supplied high-quality biosimilars.

We are closely monitoring how the biosimilars market develops in Switzerland. It will depend a lot on the speed of innovation coming through, and the regulations regarding both biosimilars and generics. It will also depend on the country´s overall economic environment. Today, even the best biosimilars are often outpaced by even better originator drugs. As long as the population desires

the best cutting-edge products, and the industry is able to deliver new innovations at a price reflecting its added value, the Swiss biosimilars market will probably not develop at the same pace that we might see in other countries.

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Switzerland acts as a decision-making hub for the pharmaceutical industry with many life science companies having their international headquarters in Switzerland, and many more with regional headquarters. How does Amgen Switzerland benefit from such an ecosystem?

Great companies attract great people, but also compete for talented people. Companies come to Switzerland for many reasons, but mainly because of the great ecosystem that exists here. With, amongst others, the two federal institutes of technology (ETH in Zurich and EPFL in Lausanne), the University of Zurich, and the IMD business school in Lausanne, there is access to great talent in Switzerland. Amgen Switzerland employs over 80 people.

We are a significant affiliate for Amgen in Europe. We are growing very fast, and to maintain our innovative approach, we need a pool of the best, highest qualified people. Here, we also benefit from Interpharma´s (our industry's key think tank) thought leadership.

Looking at the different markets you have experience in, what in your eyes is unique about Switzerland?

The Swiss healthcare system is like the Swiss railway system: it is well organized, punctual and reliable. There is also a particular readiness to engage in dialogue in Switzerland. Healthcare systems do not act in a vacuum; we have the typical Swiss political environment with direct democracy here. Being a Swiss general manager of a large biotechnology company, I also look to engage in some of the broader economic discussions. This includes issues such as the free movement of people. I will try to play my part in ensuring that Switzerland remains a country where innovation can thrive.

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