Interview: Patrick Brunner – Country Lead, LEO Pharma Switzerland

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LEO Pharma's Country Lead for Switzerland, Patrick Brunner, discusses the skincare specialist's most important products, the Swiss affiliate's significance to the global group, and the exciting new partnership with AstraZeneca.

LEO Pharma Switzerland was established back in 1991 meaning that, last year, you celebrated 25 years of in-country operations. Could you please start by giving us a sense of the scope of your activities within Switzerland and how they have evolved over time?

Our Swiss affiliate is fully dedicated to dermatological products with a strong emphasis on treating psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, actinic keratosis and bacterial infections of the skin. We are organized as part of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region with Germany as the lead market in that grouping.

We have certainly come a long way since 2008 when I first helped to launch the suspension Xamiol® on the local market, a fixed-combination formulation of calcipotriol and betamethasone dipropionate deployed to treat scalp psoriasis. Since then we have made a great deal of headway in terms of line extensions and the re-launch of old molecules, this time in radical new formulations. For example, as soon as we realized that doctors desired to proscribe Xamiol® for the whole body rather than just the scalp because of its rich texture, we took the time to conduct the necessary studies to make that a reality and validate its efficacy on other areas of the body.

Our recent launch of Enstilar®, meanwhile offers the same calcipotriol and betamethasone dipropionate combination, but this time in the form of a spray foam which actually represents a considerable upgrade on existing products in that it is much more patient centric and efficient as a therapy. The big advantage to derive from using a spray foam is that the active ingredients are completely dissolved and therefore easily pass through the skin in sharp contrast to conventional ointments where you tend to reach a saturation point above which the molecules build cristals and therefore not the full amount of active ingredients is able to pass the skin.

The other significant difference between then and now has been the intensity of the competition. Today we encounter some very strong rival products in the psoriasis segment such as Celgene's Otezla® whereas previously there were only a limited number of options for patients. Enhanced competition is actually a phenomenon that we welcome, because it keeps us on our toes, in a state of constant innovation, and ensures good outcomes for patients who are, of course, what this whole business is about and dedicated towards.

How have the acquisition of Astellas' dermatology portfolio and the recent signing of an alliance with AstraZeneca served to broaden the scope of your offering?

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The acquisition of Astellas' dermatology portfolio of prescription and over-the-counter products was one of the bigger deals in the history of LEO Pharma and takes us a step closer to becoming the world's preferred dermatology care partner. Within the palette, we gained ownership of Protopic®, a very well established therapy for atopic dermatitis along with other products such as the hydrocortisone, Locoid®, and Locobase®, a fat ointment for base therapy. At the Swiss affiliate, the impact has been profound. We are still in the process of integrating some of these products as part of our offering, but Protopic® has proved to be an especially good product with sales to the tune of three million. Since securing our first chance to promote Protopic® last summer, the product has already contributed an extra 40 percent to our local turnover.

Meanwhile the partnership with AstraZeneca is even more exciting as it represents our first foray into the world of biologics. The strategic alliance allows us to market Brodalumab, a biologic for treatment of psoriasis in Europe and also affords us the rights to another biologic Tralokinumab, an anti-IL-13 monoclonal antibody for the treatment of eczema patients. For LEO Pharma worldwide this represents landmark moment that signals our desire to assume entirely new types of capabilities.

Locally, we have already started the preparations for placing Brodalumab on the Swiss market with a view to a launch date during the course of next year. When that happens, we will be the only company in the market offering a dual portfolio of both biologics and topical treatments. This is a strength and entirely complementary as it generally makes sense for patients to be using topicals in the early stages of treatment such as the first four weeks while waiting for the biologics to take full effect.

As LEO Pharma progresses down the path of biologics, your global CEO, Gitte Aabo, has unveiled a major restructuring and reorganization of the company. How have these changes been trickling down to the local level?

The reorganization is still ongoing and right now we are busy trying to establish new capabilities within the local affiliate such as the requisite knowhow and expertise to be marketing the sorts of biologics that will soon be part of the local product portfolio. A degree of restructuring is inevitable when you consider that, for the past 20 years, LEO Pharma has been largely selling topicals and now we need to amass other in-house abilities so as to face the rather different challenges of the future. This, unfortunately, might mean letting some personnel go, but it will most definitely mean bringing in new talent. For the Swiss affiliate this actually offers a good opportunity for us to boost our team and heighten our relevance. Locally we are in the middle of a fresh recruitment drive.

Comparatively just how significant are the Swiss operations in relation to the rest of LEO Pharma’s activities across the region?

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In pure numbers, this year we aim to generate a yearly turnover of around 11 million Swiss Francs. That’s not a lot on the regional scale, but it is something and our revenue stream here in Switzerland is reliable given the relative ease of market access. Our real contribution, however, is just as much about idea-creation and testing out new approaches. Switzerland is a very well structured country with a clearly defined market and that means it is especially suitable as a pilot-study destination.

It is thus absolutely no coincidence that we were selected as one of only seven affiliates worldwide to pioneer Kleresca®, LEO Pharma’s first medical device and a treatment for acne deploying innovative biophotonics technology and a light-converting system that stimulates the high-tech repair system on the cell plane. Even in terms of internal processes, our size makes us suitable for trying out new developments such as the embracement of social media. We happen to be one of the first affiliates to maintain its own blog and a twitter strategy.

LEO Pharma is renowned for its willingness to partner with the medical community and patients alike. How do you maintain this sort of strategy in Switzerland, though, where access to doctors is limited?

When I compare with neighboring markets, there is no doubt that it is more difficult to secure access to physicians. Many dermatologists who we seek meetings with started to limit access; some of them will only receive one visit from you per year. That means that we have to be quite creative in terms of multichannel management and generating other type of 'touch point' such as mailings so as to get through to them. One positive aspect of the visit on appointment only system in Switzerland is that, during a visit, you command the physician's full attention and are allocated sufficient time to engage in an in-depth, meaningful discussion. Despite the local market limitations, even in Switzerland we have still forged the reputation of being a very approachable, hands-on, face-to-face sort of company. Despite our limited finances we have always been able to generate a lot of noise and to keep a high level of visibility to the point where many people mistake us for being the size of some of our much-larger rivals such as Galderma.

What are your ambitions and objectives looking forwards?

This is an immensely exciting time for LEO Pharma and its Swiss affiliate. Despite being a well-established company, we are right now enjoying a fast growth spurt more akin to a start-up courtesy of the profound changes that we are undergoing. My ambition is for the local affiliate to keep pace with LEO Pharma's broader aspirations: to build up our capabilities so as to be able to fulfill our new functions to the best of our abilities. With the introduction of the new biologics we hope to soon break into the top 50 pharma companies ranked by local market turnover.

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