

Interview: Peter Gmünder - CEO, Bioforce AG, Switzerland



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With a recent clinical trial showing one of Bioforce's Echinacea products to be non-inferior to the gold standard allopathic treatment Tamiflu, CEO Peter Gmünder is working to continue the work of Swiss phytopharmaceuticals pioneer Alfred Vogel by providing the highest quality natural remedies made using only fresh herbs if possible.

To begin, could you please introduce Bioforce to our readers around the world?

Bioforce is a medium sized international phytopharmaceutical company based in Switzerland. We have five subsidiaries around the world, in the Netherlands, France, Canada, Belgium and Finland, and have an extensive network of long-term and loyal distribution partners in more than 20 countries. Moreover, we have production facilities here in Switzerland as well as in France and the Netherlands, and R&D teams here in Switzerland and in the Netherlands. Across these markets, we generate about CHF 110 million (USD 110 million) in turnover, with the Netherlands as our biggest affiliate in terms of sales, followed by Switzerland, Canada, Belgium and then important partners such as in Great Britain and Spain.

Across these markets, we are best known for our Echinaforce line of products which include tablets, tinctures, hot drinks, chewables and lozenges. These products make up the core of the 'winter products' segment of our portfolio, while we also have product lines addressing the needs of women and men such as Menosan for menopause and Prostan for benign prostatic hyperplasia,

and digestion and metabolism.

These products are manufactured using fresh plants whenever possible, processed within 24 hours of harvesting, which has a strong impact on their efficacy relative to competitors. We quite literally grow our herbs next door, with our fields surrounding our manufacturing facility, to ensure the freshness of our raw materials. Moreover, all of the herbs we use, even those we must import as they do not grow well in the European climate, are grown using organic farming practices without any use of artificial fertilizers or pesticides.

What role does R&D play in Bioforce's business strategy? What are Bioforce's key objectives in terms of R&D?

Bioforce is committed to demonstrating the efficacy of our products scientifically, confirming the traditional medicinal herb knowledge gathered by our founder Alfred Vogel. With modern clinical trials and studies we have been able to demonstrate that our products have a significant medical effect, supporting their registration as pharmaceutical products with regulators such as Swissmedic. Additionally, the evidence has been strong enough that we have even been able to secure reimbursement for certain indications of some of our products in the base coverage of the official Swiss health insurance bodies.

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Recently, we ran a study comparing the efficacy of our Echinaforce Hotdrink product versus the gold standard allopathic cough, cold and influenza treatment Oseltamivir, better known as Tamiflu. This was a randomized, double blind, double-dummy, multicenter, non-inferiority clinical trial with 473 clinically diagnosed and virologically confirmed influenza patients participating in total. The results demonstrated that the Echinaforce Hotdrink was non-inferior to Tamiflu, and in fact patients treated with Echinaforce Hotdrink presented lower incidence of complications and fewer patients experiencing adverse events such as nausea and vomiting. Through such studies we strive to demonstrate that high quality natural remedies can in fact be viable alternatives to allopathic products in some indications, or good complementary treatments.

Bioforce may be the name of your company, but your products are still sold under the A. Vogel brand. Who was Alfred Vogel, and how does Bioforce continue his work today?

Alfred Vogel was a pioneer in the field of phytopharmaceuticals, who was one of the first to seek to scientifically prove the efficacy of certain natural medicines such as our products out of Echinacea. Through his research he found that fresh herbs were much more effective than dried ones, and up

until today our products are made with fresh herbs whenever possible, where they are processed within 24 hours of being harvested. He also was an enthusiastic traveler, exploring different parts of the world, often seeking to learn about the properties of medicinal plants – it was during the course of these travels that he made the relationships that became our sales partners in many countries, hence the organic structure of our international sales network.

Alfred Vogel also worked as a naturopath and nutritionist, and became known for sharing his philosophies on healthy living with his customers. As such he advocated a very holistic approach towards supporting the health of his clients based on three pillars, being information, healthy food, and natural medicines. First, he sought to prevent illness by providing people with information such that they can care for their own health, and he was active for many years as a lecturer and author of self-care literature. His most published work, “Der kleine Doktor” – “The Nature Doctor” in English – has been translated into more than 20 languages with more than 1 million copies published. Second, he sought to help encourage and support healthy eating, also to support overall health and avoid illness. Third, despite trying to stay healthy, some people will still fall ill, and so he also provided natural remedies for the sick.

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Bioforce carries on this commitment to providing information and healthy food as a part of holistically supporting healthy living, although our methods have changed somewhat. Today, we have a Health Information Center in Teufen, where we produce a regular print magazine issued 10 times per year, and regular articles published online on all our international A. Vogel homepages which work to inform people on how they can better care for their own health. In addition, we also have a show garden in Teufen AR where Alfred Vogel had his first practice and in Roggwil TG which receives each between 5000 and 7000 visitors per year, who can learn about the medicinal properties of the plants which we grow. We also have a portfolio of nutritional and healthy eating products, such as our Herbamare line seasoned sea salts which are very tasty, thus helping customers to use and consume less sodium.

Looking forward, what are your key priorities and objectives for growing the business over the next five years?

As a business with CHF 110 million (USD 110 million) in turnover across more than 20 countries, we have quite a geographically diverse business already. Thus our growth strategy will very much focus on increasing our turnover in the markets where we are already present, and we are targeting organic growth of at least four percent per annum.

The other key priority is to maintain the impeccable quality of our products, and work to get their recognition as the gold standard in herbal remedies in their respective field. Moreover, we will seek to scientifically prove that our products, the best quality natural remedies available, can be as effective as standard allopathic treatments in certain indications, and thus work to encourage physicians to appreciate these natural remedies as alternative or complementary treatments to their allopathic counterparts.

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