Interview: Jarek Oleszczuk – Country President, AstraZeneca Poland



"Poland is the second largest country globally for AstraZeneca in regard to patient numbers and we are the leader in Poland, a very exciting time for us."

05.01.2018

Tags: Poland, AstraZeneca, Pharma, Innovation, R&D, Market Access, Strategy

Jarek Oleszczuk, country president of AstraZeneca Poland, the leading R&D investor in Poland, discusses the exciting milestones that the company has achieved, including reimbursement of two breakthrough oncology therapies, as well as the company's addition of 500 staff, representing now a 1,150-strong workforce. Furthermore, he touches on AstraZeneca's key role in catalysing the nation's R&D revolution and the growing importance of the affiliate as it establishes itself as an important global hub for the company.

In the first 18 months as country president of AstraZeneca Poland, what have been your key milestones and achievements?

Thus far, it has been a fantastic journey that has entailed a lot of positive steps. Firstly, we attracted to Warsaw our global R&D, finance and HR hubs. Moreover, we have secured reimbursement of two of our truly breakthrough oncology therapies, Lynparza® and Tagrisso®. We also have managed to establish AstraZeneca as a key player in driving Poland's ambition to become a global biotechnology hub.

I am especially proud of the fact that the two new reimbursements came in record time. This clearly demonstrates that our team is able to repeatedly achieve results, and indicates the upward trend of the government to improve patient accessibility to innovative treatments. In fact, if you look at the last two years, there have been more products reimbursed than the five-years prior to

2015. Despite risk sharing agreements placing commercial pressures on companies and some drugs only being given access to small patient groups, we notice that innovative drugs are suddenly more readily available for Polish patients.

Poland is on the brink of revolutionizing its approach to healthcare delivery – the commitment to invest 6 percent of GDP in healthcare by 2025 is now firm. We remain positive that this infusion of funds will help modernize healthcare delivery and patient care in previously neglected areas such as type-II diabetes.

How were you able to successfully gain market access?

[Featured_in]

First and foremost, they are great products that clearly help patients – both are also personalized therapies which benefit patients with certain genetic mutations in their tumours or in their cells. This also means that from a payor perspective, we can precisely pinpoint patients who have the greatest chance of responding to therapy.

Secondly, we act fast. Our role as employees of AstraZeneca in Poland is to make sure that every patient who should get our product, gets the product without delay. Delay often means serious deterioration of health or even death. This is why we literally fight for days to make sure that we leverage every possible way to accelerate our processes.

Thirdly, it’s about finding a win-win situation during economic negotiations with the Ministry of Health. The government increasingly also places some value to investments made by pharmaceutical companies when discussing reimbursement. This is still not in the law but AstraZeneca certainly looks forward to such incentives being introduced. In 2017 alone, we reinvested about 80 percent of our revenues from reimbursement back into the Polish economy.

What are the products in AstraZenenca’s extensive portfolio that you are most excited about to bring to the Polish market?

[related_story]

Globally, AstraZeneca has one of the broadest and deepest clinical pipelines in industry. The most important areas of our R&D are in oncology, respiratory and cardiovascular/renal/metabolism. I recently had a long discussion with my colleague in early R&D and I have to admit that I was blown away by the types of innovation we are researching. Technologies which not long ago were non-existent or were part of science-fiction novels, are now being tested in human beings.

What is the importance of AstraZeneca Poland within the company's global operations?

Critically important! Between January 2017 and January 2018, we have grown by over 500 additional staff; from 650 to 1150. 70 percent of the delivery of AstraZeneca's global late-stage clinical trials is conducted from Poland, clearly the largest of the company's three global R&D centres.

The staff at this global clinical development center, monitor each and every step of the trials in real-time from the moment the patient is registered. They ensure every patient interaction is done correctly and on schedule for the entire scope of AstraZeneca's global clinical trial operations. The destiny and future of AstraZeneca is in Poland from an R&D standpoint.

Furthermore, the company has positioned one of three global finance centers in Warsaw. This center is the financial front office for Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and consist of 140 financial analysts that service 37 countries. Finally, Poland is also home to one of five global back office HR offices. All in all, Poland is becoming an important global hub of AstraZeneca.

What makes Poland such a great place to invest in R&D?

Poland is the second largest country globally for AstraZeneca in regard to patient numbers and we are the leader in Poland, a very exciting time for us. The nation's main asset is the people, and this is a fact we are convinced on. They are well educated, hardworking, highly motivated, enthusiastic and adapt to any situation very quickly.

How is AstraZeneca leading from the front, so the country can reach its full R&D potential?

Firs and foremost, we are a case in point as the largest R&D investor in the country's pharmaceutical industry, investing 75 percent of our reimbursed drug sales into R&D here in Poland. AstraZeneca is a pioneer in building an R&D ecosystem that has never existed in Poland previously. This is completely greenfield – people with the skills we need do not exist in Poland, we need to recruit them based on education and potential, and then train and develop them.

We want to be a key catalyst for real innovation and help to construct the nation's pharmaceutical R&D infrastructure. In turn, this will allow our highly trained workforce to remain in Poland, and work for biotechnology start-ups or other large global powerhouses that have chosen to position global R&D operations in Poland. Everything is interconnected, and we want to be key contributors in creating these favourable innovation-centric conditions.

How does Poland continue to be AstraZeneca's second home moving forward?

We want to continue to build on what we have already and improve the overall structure, to kick-start the innovative ecosystem. Secondly, we need to do more to inspire other companies to bring their capabilities to Poland and work as a collective team with the government to establish an R&D ecosystem.

Finally, we want AstraZeneca to be the first company that conducts a phase-3 trial for a truly Polish molecule. It would make me extremely proud to be part of the first ever Polish R&D pharmaceutical discovery, and AstraZeneca Poland has the resources to be part of this possible historic achievement down the line.

What culture are you looking to bring to the team as you move into the future?

The company is in the growth phase and it is a fun time to be around an expanding office. Nevertheless, the real challenge is to leverage this happiness to obtain results and build a synergistic approach across all sectors of AstraZeneca Poland. When we talk to the external world we are AstraZeneca, not R&D or sales or medical; therefore, we need to establish one culture and one voice, so we can work as a harmonious, successful team.

With my experience working in other countries it has made me more astute to diversity and the generational, cultural and gender differences. In fact, the average age of the company is less than 35, more than 75 percent of our staff are women, 70 percent of the top leadership are women and 30 staff members are international. We want to show our commitment to be a great place to work for everyone.

As a final note – AstraZeneca Poland is key contributor throughout the entire healthcare ecosystem, nevertheless, only one thing truly matters; Polish patients need to receive the best care possible, and we will be their partner along each step of the journey.

See more interviews