Roman Samiec – General Manager, Thuasne Czech Republic

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03.04.2020

Tags: Czech Republic, Medtech, Thuasne, Coronavirus

Roman Samiec, general manager of Thuasne Czech Republic, introduces the company as a key competitor in the medical devices field, with their niche products addressing the unmet medical need in the country including orthoses and homecare. Samiec describes the significant history of the French firm in the Czech Republic and how the country needs to take more steps to close the gap on Europe and improve the local market access landscape for medical devices.

Roman, you have been very present in the Czech medtech sphere. What do you find so exciting about this segment?

The local landscape was not so exciting when I started as a sales rep at Convatec in 1992. All my career, I have been in the medtech scene. I will be celebrating nearly 30 years in this business across different areas. When I joined in 2008, Thuasne was very active and one of several players on the local market importing braces, orthoses and home care products. Less visible then, within the past 12 years we have become one of the leaders, which is a fantastic achievement.

How have you continued to build the brand of Thuasne to the key stakeholders in the country?

My priority was to develop the local subsidiary of Thuasne. Everyone knows that we offer high-quality products, but it is also important to take care of the market. I want to position Thuasne as the first choice for a lot of the key stakeholders such as prescribers, patients, and traders, whether our products are prescribed to or bought by the end-user. The Czech Republic has a good potential for growth, and my HQ expects results from our historical products.

When we met with Elizabeth Ducottet, CEO of Thuasne, she stressed that Thuasne is a European company rather than just a French company. How do you leverage the French reputation whilst delivering a local experience?

In the Czech Republic, we go beyond just the distribution of products, as we are one of two countries where Thuasne manufactures. We have a factory close to Brno which manufactures a significant part of our braces. French quality and Czech labour are well connected here.

Our manufacturing presence was established over 20 years ago, so it is not a short-term strategy. For a French company to offer the opportunity to locals in the region, one with a higher unemployment rate, is fantastic. We are one of the second biggest employees in that region.

Nowadays, our competitors see Thuasne everywhere in the country. We are a well-recognized brand and not an unknown “small supplier from the garage”. Together with traditional and innovative treatments, we bring significant improvements to people’s lives. The number one group of products are orthoses. The second is in homecare. We have a very promising future in lymphology, as these products are originally patented, and focus on delivering treatments mainly to women after a mastectomy.

Can you give our readers an introduction to Thuasne’s portfolio of products in the Czech Republic?

Splitting the whole portfolio, our main products as mentioned are braces. These are based on fabrics manufactured by Thuasne. We take care of the technology, product shape, clinical studies and so on. The Thuasne brand is a guarantee of the quality of the product.

Within the target group for braces, Thuasne capitalized on the opportunity to also offer homecare products. It was logical for the company to move in this direction. Locally, we offer walkers and crutches and have been successful in this segment.

In the area of lymphology, we have a unique brand called Mobiderm. Under this brand, we sell different products such as bandages, pads and sleeves for the legs or arms, which are specific for the treatment of lymphoedema. For burns we have different products called Cicatrex.

From our interviews, we see that the Czech Republic is one of the most over-regulated markets, with increasing difficulty in market access and reimbursement procedures. How would you asses the evolution of the market access landscape here for medical devices, especially in recent years?

At the beginning of my career, over 20 years ago, there were no market access issues, as the reimbursement and pricing system was set up around the products that were available then. What I see now, as a result of more innovative and newer albeit expensive products coming to the market, is that the current system is not adapting to them. This is a trend everywhere, that reimbursement funds are reducing when products become more expensive. The key to success is that you have to offer the products that are meeting the needs of the patient. You have to adapt this to the local conditions and communicate your strategy properly to management when you see the results.

You mentioned that you think the Czech medtech system is a little bit old fashioned, and not quite ready to Close the Gap on Europe. Why is this?

In 2019, the system was completed changed. The responsibility of reimbursement was moved from the insurance companies, like VZP, to the State Institute for Drug Control (SUKL). Other changes included the change of prescription codes, in addition to how medical devices were categorized. This brought uncertainty to the market. Very often, what happens is that our new innovative products do not fit into one specific category or classification for reimbursement. We must discuss with the insurance companies, SUKL, the patient societies about whether or not our products are innovative. Sometimes we have to present clinical studies, publications or articles before they are accepted by SUKL to enter the market. Sometimes it is not easy to convince the general authorities to bring something new to Czech patients. Although a tough discussion, it is a positive one, and I want to thank SUKL for the positive steps they have made so far.

Thuasne is working in niche areas of treatment but as a vital part of the healthcare value chain. How does Thuasne stand out from other MedTech companies in the Czech Republic?

What is important for us that we have unique products, that cover the unmet medical needs of the patient in the Czech Republic. It is important for the Czech’s that our products are reimbursed, either partially or ideally, fully. A key to success is for a company to bring these benefits.

Another way we distinguish ourselves from our competitors is through our people. If you do not have good sales reps, who believe in the products, strategy, or management, then the results are inadequate. I see as a competitive advantage is that people in Thuasne are dedicated. They want to achieve over the years and work towards sustainable growth.

Your company Slogan is “Wings for Your Health”. Internally, how are you giving “wings” to your team to continue to motivate them and build a strong local organization?

Over these twelve years as general manager, I changed completely the team with few exceptions. I wanted to be involved in the search for new talent and cooperated with an agency who knew what capabilities and people I wanted to hire.

To build a strong team locally, it is important to make a good choice of candidate, but also to have good communication from my side. It is important to listen to my team. The most difficult decision I could make is if I need to communicate something that is not very popular. This is something that needs to be prepared very carefully, but it is part of life. People are the gold of the company, and if it does not work, no one company could be successful.

Looking forward, what do you have planned for Thuasne in 2020 and the future?

It is always the big question mark of what will happen moving forward, and this year will definitely be a difficult year, because of the global coronavirus situation. Our last week in February saw a decrease in the number of orders for our products. Our representatives have seen a decrease in the number of people in hospital waiting rooms. Everyone is aware not to visit them, unless critically important. However, I see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Looking at our product portfolio, I believe our orthoses division will be stable. The number of people with injuries will remain stable and people will need our equipment. As the population continues to become older, our homecare division will also remain a stable and vital part of our growth. In lymphology, we will see significant growth, as these products are very new after waiting two to three years for reimbursement, which we received in December 2019. Finally, we have a new set of products for orthopedic prosthetics.

I want to show that the team can create stable and constant growth for the company, as we remain a visible competitor in the market. The end goal is to ensure that Thuasne is the first choice for prescribers and patients.

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