Henrik Asmussen – General Manager, Amgen Switzerland



I was told when I came that Switzerland is a safe haven with easy access. What I experienced was something entirely different

26.10.2020

Tags: Switzerland, Amgen, Innovation, Strategy, HR, Access

In a wide-ranging interview, Henrik Asmussen outlines his priorities for Amgen's important Swiss affiliate, market access and pricing challenges, the company's exciting pipeline, and what makes Amgen Switzerland a great place to work.

Can you begin by giving us a brief overview of your background and how you came to become general manager for Amgen Switzerland?

I joined Amgen in 2016 as executive director and European launch lead for our cardiovascular brand and in 2017 I was appointed Switzerland GM. As I am Danish rather than Swiss, this was a fantastic opportunity to learn about a new country, political system, healthcare system, and culture.

What has surprised you most about the Swiss ecosystem? What are the similarities and differences with Denmark?

There are many similarities. For instance, Switzerland and Denmark are generally very close to the top of the world rankings of innovation, competitiveness, talent, and education. However, Switzerland differs greatly from Denmark politically in terms of the federalist system, and the

amount of decision-making power that lies within the Cantons. There are also differences in healthcare – with private insurance playing a more important role here in Switzerland – as well as in culture, and not forgetting landscape!

What is the significance of Switzerland for Amgen, especially given that the company's European headquarters are located there?

Switzerland is an important country for Amgen within an important region. Europe is the second most significant geography for the company, behind only our home market of the US.

We have a long presence here in Switzerland due to a few factors: it is an innovation-friendly country with good education and talent as well as plenty of opportunities to collaborate. Switzerland boasts very experienced scientists and top universities as well as many pharma companies, especially around Zug but throughout the country.

Our presence here in Switzerland is mainly focused on our commercial operations but we also work with many hospitals on drug development.

Having originally been in a cardiovascular role, you now head up the entire Swiss affiliate. How challenging has the transition to country manager been?

When I was in Denmark I ended up as GM for AstraZeneca when we went into a Nordic structure. That experience was a big help in my current role. When moving into global and regional roles, your focus changes, you become more strategic and get closer to senior leadership. What I have enjoyed about taking the reins at Amgen Switzerland was getting closer to customers, key stakeholders, and Amgen employees; the vast majority of staff work in country organisations so leadership becomes much more important.

What priorities did you set out initially for the affiliate?

Our industry is dependent on bringing innovation to the market to help patients live better lives. This has been our top priority from day one, so I am happy to report that under my watch Amgen Switzerland has launched several new products and is preparing for other launches. I was told when I came that Switzerland is a safe haven with easy access. What I experienced was something

entirely different. It takes a long time to get access as the environment has completely changed in recent years.

It is a two-step process. The first step is regulatory approval and then a lot of energy is spent on the second step, namely ensuring access for patients. Beyond that, we are active in areas like cardiovascular disease, bone disease, nephrology, inflammation and cancer – disease areas where many patients are not being treated optimally and there is still a high unmet need. Our focus as a company is making sure these patients get the treatment they need to get control of their diseases and live better lives.

In Switzerland, we have the ambition of becoming the most valued biopharma company by 2025. This vision was set up in 2017 and is measured not only by how customers and patients perceive us but also to what extent other external stakeholders, as well as our employees, see us as a genuine partner in healthcare.

The Swiss market access ecosystem is no longer this ‘safe haven’ of easy access, with significant delays and challenges now appearing. In this role as a genuine partner in healthcare, what solutions is Amgen bringing to the table?

We are living through interesting times! COVID-19 has shown that the need for innovation has never been higher or more visible, with the push for a vaccine and treatments dominating news headlines daily.

There are accelerated regulatory timelines to get to that point. In Switzerland today, it should take 60 days to get reimbursement on a new product but for oncology products for instance it takes more than 200 days on average.

A system whereby we get a COVID-19 vaccine and treatment into Switzerland but then need to spend 200 days negotiating its reimbursement is not sustainable. This system works based on models of the past, but when new innovations come through, we need to adapt and become more flexible.

As a member of Interpharma, this is high on Amgen’s agenda. We want to ensure that patients get access to new treatments from the day of Swissmedic approval and have helped propose several alternative pricing models to achieve this goal.

There is a positive attitude towards the pricing models we have proposed, but a sense of urgency is not there yet. Without this urgency, Swiss patients are facing delays in accessing their treatments. Moreover, as Switzerland is in competition with other countries as a destination for companies to invest in bringing new medicines to patients, there is a risk that we could be left behind; something which was not the case before.

Amgen has a fantastic pipeline with several therapies in Phase III clinical trials, with many of these products potentially making it to market in the next couple of years. As Switzerland country manager, how does this play into your planning?

You speak to one of Amgen's strengths: the world-class scientists that have been building our pipeline. Amgen is only 40 years old but has become one of the top ten biggest biopharma companies in the world, to a large extent because of our strong pipeline. We have new antibodies coming through in oncology and cardiovascular. Even for COVID-19 we have strong collaborations and partnerhips and are testing e.g. our inflammation product to see if it could have a positive impact. Also, Amgen has also partnered with Adaptive Biotechnologies, a company developing antibodies that could help treat COVID-19.

What makes Amgen distinct is our understanding of biology and the genome. We have a subsidiary in Iceland called deCODE Genetics that are experts in mapping the genome and comparing it with diseases. They are bringing a lot of insights both into how COVID-19 is spreading, as well as mutating, along with other diseases, and mapping potential targets to treat those diseases.

In terms of what we will bring to the Swiss market, the first new development will be in oncology, but our focus is on several areas, including haematology, cardio-vascular disease, and inflammation.

Given that Amgen's big biotech peers Celgene and Shire have been acquired by bigger firms, how difficult is it to continue to stand out as an independent company?

One of the things that makes us stand out from other companies is our biotechnology spirit and culture. This has been there from the beginning and continues to be so, despite our company's growth. The goal is to stay independent because this has led us to where we are today, along with the fact that it would be difficult for anyone else to acquire a company of Amgen's current size. The focus from senior leadership has been on continuing our growth based on our pipeline, along with

striking business development agreements along the way.

Amgen also has a very attractive biosimilars portfolio; what is its status in Switzerland?

Since Summer 2019, we have launched three biosimilars in Switzerland. Amgen wanted to leverage its great science and manufacturing capabilities to bring high quality biosimilars to the global market, including Switzerland. There is an opportunity to increase competition in the off-patent market, which could lead to savings that could then be invested in innovations coming into Switzerland. There is an opportunity there to compete, generate savings, and increase use at the same time.

Compared to many other markets, the uptake of biosimilars is still slow in Switzerland, mainly due to an underdevelopment of the off-patent market. There is not entirely free competition and there are incentives to prescribe the higher cost originator. We believe in free competition in the off-patent market, which means the physician’s freedom to prescribe with equal incentives. If these incentives are made even then there will be more rapid uptake. The uptake of biosimilars is moving quite a lot faster than previously and the off-patent market is increasingly being discussed at a political level, which bodes well for the future of the segment.

Amgen was recently awarded best employer in Switzerland, the kind of award that Amgen country affiliates seem to often win. Why? What are you doing well that makes your employees happy to come to work?

It is down to several factors. One is clearly that for the people that work at Amgen, it is more than a job. Our mission to serve patients really resonates and there is a feeling that we make a difference in everything we do. There is also a sense of inclusion and belonging. Our staff feel well here and work in a friendly environment with a lot of focus on teamwork and celebrating success. A final element, that goes back to the concept of still being a biotech is that we know innovation often leads to failure. Mistakes are fully accepted by management as long as it is learned from so that better solutions can be developed in the future.

We are also engaging a lot with our employees, something that has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether just brief conversations or video chats, we have worked hard to keep our staff engaged virtually. Amgen has also been offering a lot of support in terms of strategies on working from home, also with children or dogs running around the house!

We put our people’s safety as our first priority all along, making sure that they feel comfortable to come to work or otherwise allowing them to work from home, giving them the protective equipment they need, and financially supporting the equipment of home offices. The company has also been providing flu vaccinations, virtual fitness classes, resilience trainings and employee assistance programs – all for free.

COVID-19 has also thrown up a lot of challenges for senior leaders, spinning plates in cross-functional roles. What kind of leadership style have you tried to cultivate in this period?

You are right, it has also been a challenge for leaders, because there is no recipe for how to manage a situation like this. A lot of things had to be developed quite fast. One of the successes at Amgen was building a cross-functional incidence management team which meets frequently to ensure that we are fully updated on what is happening in Switzerland and in Amgen globally to inform and give advice to our staff on how best to act.

COVID-19 has also created a lot of exchange among senior leaders. We have country leader forums, where all the Europe GMs are connected virtually, quite frequently and these have proved to be an excellent source of best practice sharing and alignment on meeting and overcoming the challenges we all face. It is impossible to navigate a situation like this alone, this teamwork and information sharing is crucial.

Through this response in spring, we have been able to build up our resilience as a leadership team and as an entire affiliate that gives us confidence to take on whatever comes next.

Was Amgen already well equipped to deal with the shift to remote working and digital communication that COVID-19 necessitated?

This was something that we had to learn fast, like many other companies. We had to modernise the channels for engaging with our key stakeholders and customers. I have been quite impressed with our IS and digital teams that have equipped us with the tools to engage virtually both internally and externally. We are now committed to bringing digitalisation to the next level in all of our operations. For Switzerland as a whole, the need for a digital upgrade has become very clear over the course of the pandemic and I predict an acceleration in this field moving forward.

What do you hope to achieve over the next couple of years?

Going back to our core business, I would like to see us bring innovations to the market that make a difference for patients and that are widely used because access barriers have been minimised. I hope to see the Swiss healthcare system keep its high quality and develop into one of the best healthcare systems in the world in a sustainable way.

As a company, I hope we continue to grow by serving more patients, being able to offer more employment to talent in Switzerland. Growth means you can offer employment to more people, bring in talent, develop them and hopefully retain them.

The new generation wants more than just a corporate life. What are some of the talent attraction and retention challenges for a company like Amgen?

We are also following the demographic development and seeing the evolving needs of the generation in education or recently graduated. We need to offer opportunities for this generation to come into our offices and see that working for Amgen really has a greater purpose: helping patients. Working in an innovative sector where you learn a lot and have to develop solutions of the future that are not off the shelf is truly rewarding and very attractive to the younger generation.

From another perspective, society as a whole is ageing, and a large part of the population are moving into retirement. At Amgen, we believe that it is important to increase the healthy and active life expectancy because then people can stay longer on the labour market, generate revenue, be productive for society, and increase wealth. Amgen can play a key role in helping that development – if our treatments can lead to fewer hospitalisations or shorter time in hospitals and workers can return to work faster and be productive, that is very rewarding in itself and for society as a whole. I hope that when we bring innovations to Switzerland conversations move more in the direction of value of innovation than focusing narrowly on costs of treatments.

A final thought is that we can find ways of collaborating with those of retirement age who may not be entirely ready to fully retire. This group has knowledge that we can draw from to create better solutions.

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