Thomas Köppel – CEO & Founder, This AG



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25.06.2021

Tags: Switzerland, This AG, Medtech, Ophthalmology

Thomas Köppel, CEO & Founder of This AG, a high-tech start-up company that offers innovative ophthalmic systems, shares

his entrepreneurial spirit and the vision that led him to create Sophi, a high-end device that sets new standards when it comes to operating procedures.

As the CEO and founder, could you introduce us to This AG? What inspired you to establish the company?

I am an electronic engineer by training with expertise in hardware, software as well as mechanic development including plastic injection moulding engineering. Having worked in various international companies in the past, including on ophthalmology-related medical devices, I realized that there was a gap in the market within this niche and founded This AG in Heerbrugg, Switzerland in 2014 with the help of a group of investors who believed in me and my ideas.

This AG is a high-tech start-up company with a special focus on the design and development of ophthalmic systems, especially for cataract surgery. In 2018 we introduced our **S**wiss **Oph** thalmology **I**nnovation system known as *Sophi,* the first wireless powered Phaco-System made to offer surgical teams high flexibility, mobility and a simple surgery process. In 2021 we also introduced our tabletop device *Sophi A* and founded This GmbH in Austria to guarantee and facilitate our export process to the European Union. At the moment, we are present in 50 countries

around the world, and started the certification process to enter the Chinese market as well.

What opportunities did you see when you came up with SOPHI as a solution and what makes it so unique?

Sophi is like an assistant, it makes life easier not only for the surgeon and the surgical team, but also for our distributors, the hospital purchasing department and even the service technician. Systems thinking is extremely important here; our company name, This AG is the abbreviation of **Th**ink **i**n **S**ystem.

We take a very close look at the processes in the operating room in order to optimize usability and efficiency. This approach results in the three pillars of mobility, simplicity and security, allowing the surgical team to focus entirely on the surgery and creating a simple surgery process. *Sophi* has many features that makes it unique: for example, our device is completely wireless powered, that way the OR team will never trip over cables during surgery. Additionally, the system's foot pedal can be easily moved over the floor like a hovercraft. *Sophi* facilitates wireless video transmission between microscope and display which enables the assistant to follow the surgeon's work in real time.

How do you champion this new technology to your stakeholders?

Before COVID, we introduced our company and the Sophi System at the European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgeons (ESCRS) trade fair with 20,000 visitors and several other national and international exhibitions.

The enthusiasm for our device comes from its simplicity paired with the many new functions. I often compare it to a smartphone which is very easy to use on the outside but extremely complex on the inside. For the OR team, it is important that *Sophi* does her job as expected and reliably. However, it is a device that requires explanation. It is very important how the parameters are set but also how one behaves in the operating room. Our aim is to guarantee that the know-how and product knowledge of our technology is being passed on to all our interested parties around the world. For this purpose, we have founded the Sophi Academy.

Sophi Academy provides comprehensive training sessions to our distributors in sales, application and service in our headquarters in Heerbrugg. The Center is fully equipped, and it is a great

addition to the service This AG provides to our distribution partners, surgeons, and staff members. As an alternative to the training sessions held at our Academy Center, we also offer webinars.

Tell us more about the business model you identified as the most suitable for the company’s expansion.

For a seven-year-old company we already have a big international presence. We have a B2B business model, which means that our direct customers are the distributors in their respective areas. We supply the distributor with devices and device related consumables which complements their product portfolio. The complement of Sophi products enables the distributor to become a solution provider for anterior surgeries. That makes it easier for them to access the hospitals and offer not only Sophi products, but as well supplement their offer with other items as intra ocular lenses, liquids, further devices for diagnostics, femto lasers, etc. The hospital can thus choose its favorite products and does not have to buy everything from a single provider. Ultimately it is a win-win situation.

This AG is located in the Rhine Valley of St. Gallen, at the border triangle of Switzerland, Austria and Germany. What are the advantages of this location and of the Swiss life sciences ecosystem more broadly?

The Rhine Valley of St. Gallen is a very special area, we may compare it to a certain extent with Silicon Valley. This area is home to global high-tech producers and is known for its innovative strength. As one of the most industrialized regions in Switzerland it ranks as one of the 10 best high-tech locations in Europe, with 90 percent of all our developed and produced goods being exported. Additionally, there is a strong presence of engineers in the area, many of them are being educated nor farther than 20 kilometres away from our location. All these qualities are very relevant to us, but also the quality of life the region has to offer. After work, we enjoy our free time in the mountains, climbing, hiking, mountain biking or sailing on and swimming in Lake Constance.

During This AG’s internationalization process how challenging has it been to convince stakeholders of the value of your technology? Which markets are more inclined to adopt your services?

First, we offered our Premium device This is the device with all functions, including many convenient and dual functions with slightly different behaviour. *Sophi* is a premium device for tier 1 areas. We quickly realized that, for example, we had no chance in India with this device in terms of price, but that wealthier markets also want a cheaper option. We are in a mature, 50-year-old market in which, despite the high-quality medical products, there is great price pressure. Therefore, we came up with a solution that would allow us to reduce the price significantly and introduced *Sophi A* to the market this year, which offers the same operational result but removes many of the functions that were not absolutely necessary.

Currently, we are in the launch process of our *Sophi Eco machine*, which is positioned between *Sophi Premium* and *Sophi A* in terms of price and performance. This will allow us to be ready for tier 1 and tier 2 markets. This device portfolio enables us to tailor our offers to meet the requirements of a big range of customers.

What does the future look like for This AG?

We enjoy doing something good for OR teams and of course for patients with new innovations. We all benefit from this as employees, distributors, and hospitals. Innovations and growth cost money and therefore we have to secure sales in order to guarantee a healthy progression.

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