

Dennis Engelke – Executive Director, General Manager Switzerland & Austria, Jazz Pharmaceuticals



As we navigate an increasingly complex landscape in healthcare, it is imperative to keep patients at the centre of our focus

14.11.2024

Tags:

[Switzerland](#), [Jazz](#), [Austria](#), [Epilepsy](#), [Oncology](#), [Cannabinoids](#), [Strategy](#)

Dennis Engelke, General Manager for Switzerland and Austria at Jazz Pharmaceuticals, discusses his career trajectory and the company's growth in these markets. He highlights Jazz's commitment to patient access and innovation, especially following the 2021 acquisition of GW Pharmaceuticals, which has enabled the company to enter the epilepsy space. Engelke emphasizes the importance of collaboration among stakeholders in enhancing patient care, stating, "We must work together to enhance and innovate patient care rather than create divisions."

Can you start by introducing yourself, as well as Jazz Pharmaceuticals?

My journey in the pharmaceutical industry has spanned several key roles. I began my career at Fresenius Kabi in global marketing and corporate development, followed by a position at Actelion, where I worked in global commercial excellence. I joined Jazz Pharmaceuticals in 2015, initially focusing on portfolio strategy. In 2022, I became General Manager for Switzerland and Austria, leading the establishment of our affiliates in these two countries—a thrilling experience that blends both corporate and startup dynamics.

Before starting my professional career, I was a member of the national German team in rowing for 5 years, which profoundly shaped me as a person. I set long-term goals for myself, such as becoming a German champion and eventually winning international championships. This experience taught me the importance of following long-term objectives and working collaboratively in a team.

Jazz Pharmaceuticals celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, and the company's mission has always been rooted in two primary values: serving patients and their families while creating fulfilling career opportunities for employees. These principles have been at the core of our growth. Our journey began in neurology, where we focused on treating narcolepsy, a rare and severe sleep disorder. From there, we expanded into oncology, particularly with treatments for acute leukaemias, and we developed a product for a rare but serious complication affecting stem cell transplant patients.

In 2021, we made a transformative acquisition of GW Pharmaceuticals, allowing us to enter the epilepsy space. This has added a pioneering treatment for severe, rare forms of epilepsy, particularly in children with genetic conditions. We are also advancing our pipeline with a bi-specific antibody targeting HER-2 cancers, beginning with gastrointestinal cancers. This represents our strategic move into solid tumours, providing hope for patients in areas with significant unmet medical needs. Since launching our Swiss and Austrian affiliates, we've made four key products available in these markets, reflecting our commitment to bringing innovative treatments to patients in these regions.

What motivated your transition from global roles to leading Jazz Pharmaceuticals in Switzerland and Austria, and how has the company established itself in these markets?

After 15 years in strategic regional and global roles, I was eager to be closer to the operational side of the business, to work more directly with healthcare professionals. The opportunity to establish new affiliates in Switzerland and Austria, and to integrate GW Pharmaceuticals into our operations following its acquisition, presented an exciting challenge. I was particularly motivated by the chance to shape the culture and identity of our new teams while driving significant growth in these regions.

When I took on this role, Switzerland and Austria were part of larger market clusters, but Jazz recognized the potential of these markets and made the decision to invest by establishing dedicated country teams and leadership. Both countries have strong pharmaceutical industries and significant market potential, which made the move a sound investment.

The success of our expansion can be attributed to a clear, well-structured plan with defined milestones, as well as a strong focus on building a cohesive, high-performing team. We emphasized modern leadership principles and brought in experts who could independently manage their responsibilities while working collaboratively. Additionally, we partnered with an external organization to help shape our team culture, ensuring we fostered the right balance of teamwork and individual accountability. This unified approach has been crucial to establishing Jazz as a fully operational and thriving pharmaceutical company in these two countries.

How does Jazz Pharmaceuticals's presence in Switzerland and Austria contribute to the company's broader European strategy?

Switzerland and Austria have quickly become some of the fastest-growing affiliates within Jazz Pharmaceuticals's European network. Over the past two years, we've achieved a 60%

compound annual growth rate, which reflects our significant impact on the company's overall performance.

Despite their size, Switzerland and Austria have proven to be key markets in the pharmaceutical sector, particularly due to the presence of a highly innovative environment. However, we do face challenges, particularly around patient access and ongoing healthcare reforms. Recent changes in Swiss reimbursement laws, including a second cost-saving initiative by the government, have created hurdles for the pharmaceutical industry. It's vital that these reforms acknowledge the value of innovation, especially for companies like Jazz that invest heavily in developing treatments for rare diseases. Ensuring fair pricing and timely access to these medicines is crucial, particularly in a market as advanced and affluent as Switzerland.

Could you share your experience with bringing new products to the market in Switzerland, particularly in terms of regulatory and reimbursement challenges?

Launching four products in Switzerland over the past two years has been both rewarding and challenging. Our portfolio includes therapies for rare cancers and neurological disorders, each offering significant improvements in both efficacy and patient quality of life. However, navigating the regulatory and reimbursement landscape has proven to be a complex process.

In Switzerland, securing reimbursement through the Specialty List is essential, but the pathway lacks transparency and predictability. The Federal Office of Public Health uses European reference prices and therapy comparisons to set prices, but the criteria for selecting these comparisons are not clearly defined, which can lead to delays. Additionally, there is no established timeline for completing health technology assessments, leaving pharmaceutical companies facing uncertainty.

For instance, our epilepsy therapy, which is dispensed primarily in outpatient settings, has faced similar delays in gaining access to the positive reimbursement list. We also have hospital products that fall under the Swiss Diagnosis-Related Groups (SwissDRG) system, which affects reimbursement and additional payments. These delays have a direct impact on patient access, which conflicts with our company's mission to provide timely and equitable treatment.

To address these challenges, we are actively working with vips & Interpharma to advocate for more defined criteria in the health technology assessment process and clearer timelines for reimbursement decisions. It's crucial that we find a balance that ensures patients can access innovative treatments while allowing pharmaceutical companies to operate in a fair and sustainable environment.

Can you walk us through your key growth drivers in Switzerland?

In Switzerland, there is significant growth potential in our in-line products, both in rare epilepsies, and oncology, where we market a therapy for high-risk acute myeloid leukaemia (AML). This product uses a unique liposomal technology that combines two cytotoxic agents, delivering them to leukaemia cells in an optimal ratio. It is a good example of Jazz's science-driven approach to drug discovery and development and a how a focus on novel mechanisms and platform technologies enables us to impact some of the most challenging unmet needs in cancer care.

We're equally excited about our pipeline, particularly a new HER2-targeting drug currently under regulatory review as a second-line treatment for patients with HER2-positive biliary tract cancer

(BTC). As clinical research in multiple different cancer types continues to add to the data available for this therapy, we look forward to progressing a bispecific antibody treatment approach on behalf of patients who are in need of novel and potentially chemotherapy-free options.

What trends and challenges are currently shaping the landscape of epilepsy treatment in Switzerland and Austria, particularly concerning patient care transitions and stigma?

In the field of epilepsy, our product is indicated for children from 2 years to adult, and it is important to recognize that each seizure can inflict neurological damage. Therefore, initiating effective combination therapy at an early stage is essential for minimizing long-term neurodevelopmental consequences. However, a significant challenge arises during the transition from pediatric to adult care. While children benefit from comprehensive support, the involvement of families and caregivers often diminishes as they reach adulthood, leading to gaps in care.

In Switzerland, although there are Epilepsy competence clinics that provide comprehensive health care provision, the transition process requires enhancement to ensure continuity of care. We are developing a patient support program tailored specifically for our epilepsy treatment. This initiative aims to improve adherence for patients prescribed our treatment, elevate Jazz support to top-in-class for caregivers, patients and HCPs and enable a meaningful experience that helps bridge caregiver/patient and HCP communication gaps. By addressing these issues, we aim to improve patient outcomes and ensure that individuals living with epilepsy receive the comprehensive care they deserve.

In Switzerland's competitive pharmaceutical market, how does Jazz Pharmaceuticals attract talent, particularly with the presence of major companies like Roche and Novartis?

At Jazz Pharmaceuticals, attracting talent in Switzerland has proven to be a rewarding experience. Many industry professionals are eager to join smaller, innovative companies like ours, which are increasingly recognized in the Swiss pharmaceutical landscape. Our core values—prioritizing patient needs and fostering enriching career experiences—serve as compelling factors for prospective employees.

Additionally, we emphasize flexible working arrangements, allowing our team members to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Unlike some larger companies, we do not impose rigid office hours, which enables greater flexibility in where and how our employees work. This commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment helps foster a sense of belonging among our team. Our modern leadership culture further differentiates us. We strive to be perceived as a progressive organization, focusing on customer engagement that is responsive to the specific needs of healthcare professionals (HCPs). By actively listening and collaborating with HCPs, we develop tailored solutions to address the unique challenges in the rare disease sector.

Having spent nine years with Jazz, I can attest to the company's supportive atmosphere, which encourages personal and professional growth. The opportunities I have encountered, such as transitioning into the role of General Manager, have provided me with continuous challenges and invaluable learning experiences—elements that are crucial to my career satisfaction.

What are your key priorities and milestones for Jazz Pharmaceuticals in Switzerland as you look ahead to 2025, particularly as a burgeoning affiliate?

As we plan for 2025, our foremost priority is to enhance patient access to our therapies. Currently, two of our four products available in the region are reimbursed, and we are diligently working with the Federal Office of Public Health to secure full reimbursement for the remaining two. Achieving equitable access to these therapies is a vital milestone for us.

Additionally, we are dedicated to positioning our key growth treatments for acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) and epilepsy, ensuring that patients can achieve the maximum benefit from these therapies. A significant milestone on the horizon is the anticipated launch of a new solid tumour therapy in 2025, pending Marketing Authorization from the European Medicines Agency (EMA). This launch will mark our entry into the solid tumour therapeutic area, offering a promising option for patients with high unmet medical needs.

On the team front, we have successfully built a strong culture of belonging and identity within our organization. As we move into the solid tumour space, maintaining this positive culture is a priority that requires ongoing commitment. We are focused on enhancing collaboration among team members and supporting individual growth, helping us evolve into a high-performance organization that meets the dynamic needs of our patients effectively.

What final message would you like to share with stakeholders in Switzerland and the global audience regarding Jazz Pharmaceuticals's efforts?

As we navigate an increasingly complex landscape in healthcare, it is imperative to keep patients at the centre of our focus. There are numerous shared goals among regulatory authorities, payers, and the pharmaceutical industry, and it is essential to prioritize the needs of patients in our discussions and actions.

Collaboration is crucial; we must work together to enhance and innovate patient care rather than create divisions. Establishing an open dialogue and ensuring transparent governance in health technology assessments will be vital to achieving our collective objectives. By fostering cooperation among all stakeholders, we can significantly improve patient outcomes and drive meaningful advancements in healthcare.

[See more interviews](#)
