

Interview: Albin Egger – Country Representative, UCB Pharma Austria



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18.12.2017

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Albin Egger, country representative of UCB Pharma Austria, discusses the strong performance of the Austrian affiliate within the global group, organizational restructuring, and the receptiveness of Austria to UCB’s innovative products.

Globally, UCB registered nine percent growth for the first nine months of 2017. How would you describe the contribution of the Austrian affiliate to this success?

In Austria, we will generate higher revenues than in 2016. It has hence been a good year for us; we will grow more than previous years, and we are in line with the group’s overall growth and performance.

When you became general manager of the Austrian affiliate, UCB Central European operations were restructured. Germany, Switzerland and Austria were bundled together, while Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary were assigned to S.E. Europe. What was the rationale behind this structural shift? And what have been the benefits accrued?

The thinking behind was that we mostly speak the same language and we are considered to be the German speaking nations of Europe. This eases work between us in terms of communication, but most importantly, we can use the same promotional materials, which creates several efficiencies for the group. In Switzerland, the situation is a bit different as they speak several languages according to the region, but all in all, we believe such a grouping of countries makes sense to business and operations.

Bearing in mind that the company has made big-ticket investments in neighbouring markets such as Switzerland with a CHF 300 million new facility in Bulle, how would you characterize the strategic relevance of UCB's Austrian activities relative to the rest of the region?

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UCB has indeed made a significant investment in Switzerland, and Bulle is very much state-of-the-art of what can be done today! I actually visited the facility and was astonished with it. In Austria, we don't have any production, and we are solely a marketing and sales organisation catering to the Austrian community. We just cannot compare ourselves in this way to Switzerland which as we said also has this new production plant.

How do you explain your growth rate, which is actually higher than the overall growth of the Austrian market?

It all comes down to our excellent products! Cimzia, which is indicated in the treatment of adult patients with rheumatoid arthritis, received three new indications in 2016 implying that the product is still growing. With Vimpat, we have a very good product to treat epilepsy which followed UCB's blockbuster Keppra which was one of the best therapy in the area of epilepsy. Neupro in the Parkinson's area was a product that we got following the 2006 acquisition of Schwarz Pharma. This product also performs very well on the market. We are still growing, with for example restless leg syndrome. This results in good growth for the Austrian market.

How receptive is the Austrian regulatory and reimbursement system to innovative medicine?

Here I have to say it has been getting more and more difficult over the last two years, everywhere in Europe, but especially in Austria. It is very difficult for innovative products to get a realistic price. Also, it is difficult to get reimbursement. If there are any generic products available, the authorities compare them and force us to bring the prices down to a similar level than the generics, and therefore do not consider us to be innovative. If they do not consider us to be innovative, we are not able to discuss prices. This is a different procedure than in other countries. The overall context has become more difficult as the authorities are really pushing for budget cuts.

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Which products and therapeutic areas are today driving your revenues here in Austria, and how might this evolve, as we understand that UCB today has the broadest clinical pipeline in its history?

First of all, the products that generate the most revenue are CNS products in Austria. When I joined UCB 25 five years ago, we were specialists in allergies and still have some products on the market generating sales in this field. Finally, we have several other products in various therapeutic areas which support our revenues.

For new indications, we are expecting now for Vimpat the monotherapy and paediatrics, which will happen in 2018. Hopefully will go for reimbursement and then we will have a new indication for Cimzia next year. Cimzia is also always looking for new value for patients.

We will also have a new product for osteoporosis which is planned to come to Austria in 2019. We are confident it will strengthen sales, as the product looks really good and has very promising opportunities.

Where do you see the main competition coming from, and how do you proactively go about differentiating UCB's in-country offering from those of the competition?

There are many companies competing in our therapeutic areas, and they are increasingly going in the direction of having patients in focus. In that way I am quite happy we are one of the companies that has been doing this the longest. In the case of CNS, like in epilepsy, we are the leader in Austria. We are continuously supporting patient organisations in all therapeutic areas across Austria.

What are your immediate priorities looking forward?

For me, the most important will be to receive reimbursement for the indications in CNS and getting the reimbursement for Briviact, our newest antiepileptic drug approved by FDA as monotherapy treatment of partial-onset seizures in adults just last September

To conclude, what message would you like to send to our international community in Austria and why it is so vibrant?

Austria is still a good country. It is a good country to work for the pharma industry. In the last two to three years, there has been a lot of pressure from authorities, that is certain as they don't accept innovative products as much as they used to. Despite this issue, Austria is a great place to work.

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