

Interview: Pamela Alexa – Country Manager, Pfizer Switzerland



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Pfizer Switzerland's Pamela Alexa discusses launching Xeljanz (tofacitinib), a treatment for adult patients with moderate to severe active rheumatoid arthritis, building upon Pfizer's tradition of developing patient-centered therapies. She also discusses supporting research in Switzerland through the Pfizer Research Prize Foundation, which celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2016.

What have been your key priorities since taking over as Pfizer Country Manager in Switzerland in January 2014?

Switzerland provides an excellent environment for pharmaceutical companies to operate in, with a supportive structure that is well organized and has transparent rules and regulations. Pfizer aims to be not only a good corporate citizen, but to contribute to the society in which we serve. We have an extremely wide range of medicines. Indeed, just about everybody either knows somebody that is on a Pfizer product, or at the very least, knows somebody that could benefit from one of our medicines. We take our responsibilities very seriously. Pfizer Switzerland is active at all parts of the spectrum, from vaccines that prevent diseases, to the prevention of further complications once disease strikes. We strive to help make sure that people are diagnosed early and then receive the best available treatment. We offer products in the areas of oncology and infectious diseases, as well as other areas such as cardiovascular, pain management, rare diseases, and inflammation. We are present in all these leading categories. My priority as country manager is to ensure that Pfizer is well represented within the country as a premier biopharma company, and ensure that our products are accessible to the patients that need them. I also have a second hat, as Head of Pfizer Innovative Health in Switzerland, overseeing the development and success of our innovative portfolio in the country.

At the 2015 annual review, Pfizer's Chairman and CEO, Ian Read, noted that in 2015 the company achieved its first year of operational revenue growth since 2009, with every part of the business turning in a strong performance. Has this global trend been reflected at the local level in Switzerland?

Pfizer Switzerland is performing well in achieving our business areas. Being able to provide excellent and meaningful products to the patient has been at the heart of our success. Our products are well researched and provide a meaningful difference in patients' lives. We practice high quality manufacturing principles, and always look to have a good supply of our products. We interchange with the local healthcare providers on a regular basis, providing comprehensive data and information, allowing physicians to make the right choices for the patients whom they serve.

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Since 2011 Pfizer globally has had 15 new drug approvals. Have there been any particular products that have been driving your growth in Switzerland?

We are extremely pleased to have had the opportunity to launch Xeljanz in Switzerland, the first oral JAK inhibitor treatment for rheumatoid arthritis. This breakthrough innovation has been launched in 48 markets globally, including the US, and Switzerland, it has yet to be launched in the European Union. Switzerland was one of the first markets in which we launched this product. Xeljanz has been an important innovation in our inflammation and immunology portfolio, building upon Pfizer's tradition of developing patient-centered therapies. The availability of Xeljanz provides physicians with a novel treatment option for people with rheumatoid arthritis, who previously had an inadequate response or intolerance to methotrexate, or who may prefer an oral treatment, offering an important treatment option for the Swiss RA patient. Swissmedic, the Swiss agency for the authorization and supervision of therapeutic products, approved Xeljanz in 2013. Swissmedic has a scientific exchange and relationship to the FDA, and were able to utilize the data and product submission from our FDA dossier. Pfizer Switzerland has played an important role in helping our other affiliates, as they look to launch Xeljanz. In this regards we act as a model for our other affiliates across the world.

Oncology is an extremely competitive field in Switzerland, where many pharma companies are active. What is it about Pfizer's products that will help to set it apart?

At the heart of Pfizer's brands are science and the benefit they can bring to the patient. It is the science that allows us to differentiate what is the best choice for an individual patient, and allows the physician to consider how the patient can have the optimal outcome.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Switzerland. There is still much work to be done. We need to change the mind-set from one that views cancer as a death sentence, to one that sees cancer as something that is chronic or can even be cured if treated appropriately. We do not see ourselves as being in competition with other pharmaceutical companies, but rather in competition against cancer. We need to ensure that we work faster and harder than cancer, to be able to benefit the patients. For example, we have launched three products in the last four years in oncology, one product as a first in class after only six years of development for a special type of lung cancer. Switzerland was the first country in Europe to launch this product so that patients could be treated sooner. At the heart of Pfizer's brands are science and the benefit they can bring to the patient. It is the science that allows us to differentiate what is the best choice for an individual patient, and allows the physician to consider how the patient can have the optimal outcome. This goes beyond efficacy, to issues such as tolerability and safety.

Our excellent partnership with Merck KGaA has helped develop the latest immuno-oncology treatments. One of Pfizer's key values is collaboration. With the specific know-how Merck KGaA has in immuno-oncology, we are able to align our strengths for the benefit of the patient.

Pfizer also works with SAKK (Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research), where we jointly award an honor toward patient-oriented practice relevant to research in clinical oncology.

While America has a culture of risk and reward, enabling a culture of innovation, Switzerland's image as a country is of being more risk-adverse. How would you describe the Swiss mindset and the impact it has on Pfizer's development?

Both countries embrace innovation, always striving to improve, so innovation is at the heart of that. I do not see the Swiss as risk-adverse, but rather very conscious of where they take risk. When it comes to saving people's lives, it is important to take time, and carefully consider the options. While the majority of Pfizer's R&D activities take place in the US, we do play an important role in supporting research in Switzerland. Just this year we celebrated our 25th anniversary of the Pfizer Research Prize, where we celebrate young researchers. It is an exceptional foundation where we have a group of independent physicians that screen applications of cutting edge science. It allows young researchers to highlight their innovations early on in their career, and inspires them to continue with their research, and continue to challenge the status quo. Over the last 25 years we have honored over 280 young researchers. Pfizer Switzerland also runs foundations that support both pediatric research and geriatric patients. We conduct interdisciplinary collaboration with the University of Zurich with a focus on personalized medicine, as well as supporting the registries for rheumatology and other disease entities. Pfizer believes in being an active contributor to the health ecosystem in Switzerland, supporting the advancement of medicine to the benefit of all.

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As an American my assessment of the health care system in Switzerland allows for more patient autonomy, the patient can opt to see a physician who meets their specific needs. Empowering the patient to make their own healthcare choices is something that unites the two countries. I started my career as a nurse and I have always found that when you involve the patient in their care, you achieve better outcomes.

What are your main priorities for Pfizer Switzerland over the next few years?

We want to continue building on the access patients have to our medicines, ensuring that they are available to all. Linked to that is a need to develop more medicines, allowing more people to lead healthier lives. We need to increase our focus on preventative healthcare, particularly regarding vaccines. Being able to prevent a childhood death due to a vaccine is an opportunity that should not be missed. I grew up in a generation where we did not have vaccines to counter diseases such as pneumococcal disease or pertussis. I have seen first-hand what happens when you do not, or cannot, vaccinate a child. Children suffer, parents anguish, and society comes to grips with how vulnerable we all are. Equally important are adult vaccinations, such as for tick-borne encephalitis and pneumococcal disease, and others that need to be further developed. As a society, we need to be more proactive in ensuring that our populations are vaccinated. **Dr. David E. Bloom**, an economist at the University of Harvard, whose work focuses on health, demography and education, has a saying that "health equals wealth"; if you have a healthy nation, then you have a wealthy nation. The opposite is also true. If you have a high burden of disease to address, then your nation will be poorer for it. Personalized medicine will be another important issue for the future. This goes beyond a particular brand or product, but how it fits in with the patient's entire treatment process. The field of patient centered treatment is an area where Pfizer will continue to work.

What is it that motivates you most in your job?

What motivates me today is the same as what motivated me when I was starting out my career as a nurse: the patient. Being able to serve patients in a caring and holistic manner drives my every action.

[For more information on the Pfizer Research Prize, please click here.](#)

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