

Interview: Vladimir Uraz – General Manager, ALK, Slovakia & Czech Republic



ALK is the genuine leader in scientific knowledge and innovation capacities in its segment.

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The general manager of ALK Czech Republic and Slovakia on his strategy which led to success within the first one and a half years of ALK's physical presence in the cluster. Furthermore, he highlights the significance of having the right people in the right place and positioning the company as a partner to patients, physicians and governmental stakeholders.

Could you please introduce yourself and your background to our readership?

In my twenty years in the pharmaceutical industry, it was always important to me to work within the innovative segment of the industry. Being part of bringing innovative treatments to patients and being on top of science has been dear to me. During my career, I have worked for Sanofi in different positions and eventually also as director for some parts of NE and CEE region, I also worked for Merck for four years before assuming position for ALK Abello in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with the mandate to build up its operations here from scratch. The main reason why I took up this challenge was because ALK is the genuine leader in scientific knowledge and innovation capacities in its segment. The allergy immunotherapy is a real medical breakthrough in tremendously improving the quality of patients's lives. Moreover, although we're obviously aligning with global corporate values and guidelines, I have the chance to influence the establishment of the operations here and have significant impact which was really incentivizing for me. I do hope that ALK in the Czech Republic and Slovakia will benefit from my extensive experience and that I can successfully apply my learnings I gained throughout the years to our operations here.

What are the most important learnings?

That's very simple to answer: People. Everywhere I was, this was what made operations a success or led them to failure. In any position I held or any team I have led it, results were always depended on the skills of the people, their willingness, their ability to move things and the commitment to go the extra mile when needed. In other words: you may have the perfect strategy, the perfect great product portfolio and extensive resources, but if you don't have the right people the latter will not be enough to succeed. Quite contrary, you may have an average strategy, an ordinary product portfolio and limited resources, but having the right people in place can still lead you to success! This is one of my most significant learning from over 20 years, probably not only in the pharmaceutical industry. Here in our Slovakian and Czech affiliate we're still at the beginning, but from start have been thinking big and are very well progressed with our endeavor. I have a highly professionally skilled team, very able people, genuinely believing in what we do and always striving to give their best. My team is the reason why in only one and half years of establishing our physical presence here, we're already market leaders, have very well established business processes and highly positive performance results. We're also already positioned as genuine partner of the patients and physicians in the allergy immunotherapy segment.

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What is special about this segment?

It is a highly interesting area because it is one of the areas where significant change is currently happening. The rate of innovation and quality of said innovation is not easy to find in many other segment. The segment is also undergoing substantial Pan-European changes in terms of standardization, a strong focus to an evidence-based medicine (EBM) approach, and is moving towards using only registered products—which currently isn't the case in several western countries. The scientific understanding is changing as well! There is more and more evidence which proves that allergies and asthma are significantly interlinked as two ends of the same process. Mainly patients with pollen and house dust mite allergy are at high risk of developing asthma—50 percent of pollen allergy patients will develop asthma—which is why the perception and positioning of allergy immunotherapy is changing towards the only causal treatment that will change the progression of the disease entirely. Taking into consideration that the prevalence of this type of disease seems to be developing into a pandemic scope—every fourth person has allergy's and tendency is rising—another dimension to the significance of this treatment is added. The potential consequences on society, economy, healthcare budget and more are solemn.

Our efforts are focused on bringing solutions to the patients, physicians, government authorities and regulatory stakeholders alike, offering collaboration and partnership thus benefiting society at large. I believe this mind-set is what differentiates us! We're very well positioned in the segment because we offer a perspective for the future and are investing significantly in innovation in Europe and across the world! This is why we're the leading company in allergy immunotherapy.

ALK is the distinguished player in the treatment and curing of allergies. Could you please outline the product portfolio you offer?

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Our portfolio is very interesting in terms of development and evolution.

Our beginnings in the allergy immunotherapy segment start with injection immunotherapy (SCIT), a highly effective treatment, however, comparatively complex in terms of treatment management requiring frequent visits of the physician. Sometimes patients would need to be hospitalized in order

to receive treatment which is not only inconvenient for the patient but also resource intensive. Our injection treatment ALUTARD® is offered in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It is very well established and many fans of it can be found among physicians.

The second part of the portfolio are our sublingual immunotherapy tablets (SLIT- tablets) – the products of the future! Best EBM documented treatment, very easy to use, very convenient for the patients and saving a lot of costs for society. And as no injection is needed, all of the aforementioned challenges and issues with the injection treatments fall away.

We have GRAZAX® as our flagship treatment for grass allergy, present in the Slovakian and Czech market as well – and with GRAZAX® we’re leader in both markets. Furthermore, we plan to launch ACARIZAX® very soon in both markets as well; again a highly effective SLIT treatment for house dust mite allergy with tremendous data also in the asthma field, expected to be launched this year in Slovakia and next year in the Czech Republic.

Last but not least, we plan to complete our SLIT portfolio with our Ragweed treatment, currently registered in the US under the FDA. Ragweed is specifically frequent in some CEE countries and we’re thinking about a European registration in order to reach the patients in my region with our innovative treatment.

GRAZAX® is already market leading after only one and a half years of establishing your affiliate here. What is the strategy that led to this success?

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We focus on positioning ourselves as genuine partner for our patients and their physicians, we listen to their challenges and needs and bring the right solution for the latter. I didn’t mention our diagnostics portfolio yet – the best example of our commitment to patients! The diagnostics segment isn’t significant in terms of turnover or profit at all. The diagnostic tools are highly complex and difficult to produce whilst offering a minimum of margins. From a pure business perspective this segment isn’t the most feasible. Nonetheless, as corporation, we still focus on further developing this portfolio and thus ensuring the offering to physicians, simply because we understand that physicians are in need of these tools. We recognize this part of our portfolio as prime example of our commitment to customers, we do everything possible to make their patient management accurate and successful.

Another example of our outstanding commitment to provide solutions when needed occurred at the end of 2015, when European wide treatments of one of our competitor had to be called back from the different markets thus leaving thousands and thousands of patients and physicians without treatments and tools. Especially autoimmune therapies can’t just simply be paused without any consequences, therefore the pressure of stepping up and filling the gap of treatment availability was significant. Nonetheless, across Europe we managed to supply all physicians and patients with treatments by stepping up our operations overnight, working tirelessly having the patients in mind. For us at ALK, it was natural to assume responsibility and ensure that patients and customers are served. As I said, we’re a solution provider, there was a crisis and we succeeded in providing the solution. That’s our believe, philosophy and approach.

I would like to highlight, that I hope that our competitor recovers soon – not for the sake of competitor, but for the sake of the market and its stakeholders. We need to have different offers, different therapeutic approaches and competition on the market for the benefit of the society within the market at large.

ALK has proven itself as partner for patients and physicians. Youâ??ve mentioned earlier, that you also want to be the partner for government and regulators. What makes you the right partner?

Our strategyâ??and philosophyâ??is to move the segment at large towards full standardization; for us this simply means to raise the bar across Europe! In collaboration with patient organizations, medical societies, physician, regulatory authorities and government stakeholders we want to ensure that every patient in need receives appropriate treatment. Such a status obviously makes our life easier as well! Regulatory requirements get tougher year-on-year, which is basically beneficial to all stakeholders. It is simply the future of the industry, because there must be a guarantee of quality and safety for the patients. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia weâ??re already moving strongly in that direction; we have only registered products on the market! Authorities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia have very high criteria within the registration process as well as in pricing and reimbursement! Our registered products, backed by sound results and proven studies, ensure a smooth process throughout the system and we intend to keep it that way. We bring strong evidence into the process with high quality dossiers answering all question necessary when bringing our products to the market and thatâ??s our part of collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

Whatâ??s more, we genuinely anticipate the dialogue with the decision makers, regulators and government authorities to be able to show them the burden of allergies, its connection to asthmatic diseases and increase awareness of this segment. Weâ??re often fighting the perception of relevant stakeholders, which believe that allergies are merely a minor impact on society and a life-style problem for patients. Reality is the opposite! It is serious problem which is progressing to asthma, a serious disease and very difficult for patientsâ??especially younger patients! We want to increase awareness of the real burden which is the indirect impact of this disease on economic performance and society at large. In a dialogue with the relevant authorities, we could collaboratively work on solutions! In the course of the dialogue we can also agree on how to deliver these solutions to physicians and ultimately the patients in a sustainable and for both partiesâ?? cost-effective way!

I believe a well-established dialogue could have significant benefits for the general public and the industry alike. Saving costs for the system will impact the economic performance of the country because it allows more investments into innovation on the industry side, therefore allowing the improvement of available treatments and health solutions to the population. We are offering this option and I believe this is what will lead all stakeholders to a brighter future!

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