

# Interview with Lenka Poleková, Country Manager, Celgene Czech Republic

---

---

10.09.2012

---

*Ms. Polekova, you established the Celgene affiliate in this country from scratch in 2008. When we spoke to Mr. Victor Ferkovich, your colleague in Russia, he commented on his own experience starting the Russia affiliate: "The Celgene office was then one room, of about 14 square meters I only had a table, a phone, and a computer! It was a paperless office, as they say. Actually this was a very useful time, because after you leave a big corporation [Mr. Ferkovich came from JnJ], where everything is taken care of, to start something new, you start to understand that nothing comes without effort. You need to do many things yourself. You begin to understand how corporate processes should be established." How would you describe your experience?*

During my very first interview in our Warsaw office in 2007, the organization's European president Philippe van Holle and I discussed how to make the products of Celgene available to those Czech patients who need them most. It was him who made me enthusiastic about this company and its vision. Celgene opened its representation in Europe in 2006, and in 2007-08 established its presence in Eastern Europe. I believe that the start-up process was similar for all affiliates. We all started from scratch.

Hence, our early days in the Czech Republic were similar to other EU countries. In terms of materials, we had nothing. I did not even have a table, a phone or a computer. I started working before having an office.

It was the great motivation of our employees that made our establishment in Europe a success. We woke up and went to bed with the intention of making our drugs available to Czech patients. Material things were not relevant compared to providing relief for people who were suffering from terrible diseases such as Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS) and Multiple Myeloma (MM).

Each country is different in terms of market access and its reimbursement system. What is not country specific is the entrepreneurial spirit of the people at Celgene and their drive to achieve our goals and help patients as soon as possible.

Today, market access is challenging in every country. With this said, when we entered the Czech market in 2008, the environment in general was particularly difficult because the world was in the beginnings of the financial crisis. Furthermore, a new drug can only be introduced in the Czech Republic after two other countries introduce it in Europe. The system in this country is very complex, and it requires a great deal of paperwork.

I would like to add that as Celgene, we have a close tie to the Czech Republic, because one of our key drugs, 5-azacitidine was first synthesized 50 years ago in Prague by Czech chemists as a potential chemotherapeutic agent for cancer. The molecule has since been redeveloped and was approved by U.S. authorities in 2004 as the first drug used in the treatment of Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS).

---

***Celgene's tagline, "Committed to Improving the Lives of Patients Worldwide," indicates that the patient is at the forefront of every operational decision. How does the company embody this ethos in the Czech market?***

At Celgene, we seek to deliver truly innovative and life-changing drugs for our patients. As an organization, we need employees that share our values. When you are setting up an organization from scratch, you have to focus on hiring process carefully and you need to think about the future. You need to have people that you can rely on and whom you can trust. This was a challenge. I am proud of my team—Celgene CZ has been able to attract employees of the highest caliber since our earliest days.

The vision of this company is to become the leader in the development of innovative products for devastating diseases such as MDS and MM. I feel that every employee shares this vision. I have not felt this at any other company before.

Even though we are a small team in the Czech Republic and we are relatively new on the market, we have been able to support patient organizations since the very beginning. I am pleased to see how over the years new patient groups have been created and the patient movement in Czech Republic grew in strength—the example that comes to mind is the MDS group. We partner with patient organizations and support their initiatives aimed at raising awareness, education and ensuring that the best standards of care are available to all patients across our country.

Celgene's main disease areas are unknown to many people. There are only a few doctors capable of diagnosing these illnesses. Imagine a patient being diagnosed with MM or MDS—he or she would have many questions! Answering these questions is something the association tries to achieve.

10 years ago, life expectancy for a patient diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma was three months to one year maximum. Today, thanks to new medicines patients live 10 years longer.

At the highest level, our values inform what we do. They are expressed through every employee of Celgene every day—at every level of the organization and in every office around the world. For us, these are not just words: in anything we do, we think first of how our actions should affect the patient. That is why our first value is "Passion for the patient." As part of our dedication to this, we sponsor activities in collaboration with patient associations, such as yoga. This is also an inspiration for patients to get outside their homes and prevent depression.

***There are currently 300 clinical trials ongoing in major medical centers worldwide using compounds from Celgene. Is the Czech Republic incorporated into this effort?***

We are very proud to say that the Czech Republic is one of Celgene's top three countries in terms of clinical trials per capita and number of patients in clinical trials per capita.

We made this commitment, first and foremost, because of the skill level of doctors in the Czech Republic. The number of highly qualified doctors who conduct research is very robust here.

Today, we have more than 300 patients participating in our clinical trials. This is beneficial both for patients, doctors and payers. Patients can have access to innovative drugs that have not reached the market yet, doctors are benefiting from having most up to date science experience, and last but not least, we help to make savings for the national healthcare budget.

Overall, research is key for us. We invest 31% of our revenues into innovative scientific research. We are now expanding our R&D focus beyond hematological conditions into solid tumors as well as

---

inflammatory diseases.

***Do you, as a company, have a voice with government stakeholders in your country?***

Celgene is a member of the Association of Innovative Pharmaceutical Industry (AIFP), which brings together pharmaceutical companies and maintains relationships with the government in Czech Republic. The AIFP had a significant chance to discuss all of the health-related legislation that has lately been in development. If we approached the authorities as individuals, we would not be heard. The mission of the AIFP is to promote the highest possible availability of innovative pharmaceuticals which are developed and brought to Czech patients by member companies of the association, and to contribute to the cultivation of the environment and consolidation of ethical principles in the Czech pharmaceutical market.

***Celgene strongly believes that every patient that needs your drugs should be able to access them. Is this the case in the Czech Republic?***

Not yet. This is our objective and we are working in this direction. Our government has been making an effort to supply patients in need with the products that will help them. But on the other hand, I respect the government's position. I understand that the healthcare budget is limited and the authorities must manage their expenses. Step by step we will get there. We will not and even must not give up, as long as our medications have potential to help patients with debilitating conditions, such as MM and MDS. We are working closely with the Czech government to ensure patients in our country have access to the innovative treatments.

***By 2015, Celgene plans to generate revenues of \$8-9Bn, which indicates substantial growth over the company's currently expected revenues of approximately \$5.5Bn in 2012. Can the Czech Republic do its part to keep up with this projected global growth rate?***

Based on the broadened therapeutic indications that we expect to receive for our existing drugs in the near future, I am sure that the Czech Republic will remain an important country for Celgene. In our company culture, each and every voice is listened and significant. We have a great team here, which can bring great ideas to the organization—we have proven this in the past.

***How do you ensure that you keep your employees motivated now that you are no longer a start-up in this territory?***

As I have mentioned, although we are now quite established in the Czech Republic, we have a long way to go. There are still a lot of patients who need our products and do not have access to them. Our greatest goal is help people, and whether we are a start-up or an established organization, this ambition does not change. Our employees are extremely motivated to continue to build what we have started here.

[See more interviews](#)

---