Max Pahlow – Managing Director, J&J Innovative Medicine Switzerland



Switzerland isn't a lucky country; it's a country that has made its own luck through relentless hard work and collaboration

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Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine's Max Pahlow discusses how the company's commitment to innovation and patient care drives its success in Switzerland. He highlights the importance of advancing clinical trials, digitalization, and modernizing the pricing and reimbursement system to maintain Switzerland's competitive edge in healthcare.

What can you tell us about Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine's presence in Switzerland?

Johnson & Johnson has been part of Switzerland's landscape for over 65 years, and today it stands as one of our most significant economic footprints outside the U.S. With more than 5'000 employees across nine sites located in seven cantons, our presence here is diverse and extensive. This network is supported by more than $300 million in capital investments, underscoring our deep commitment to Switzerland as a strategic hub for innovation and healthcare.

Each of our sites has a distinct role. Schaffhausen, for instance, is pivotal for global supply in our innovative medicine portfolio, particularly in immunology and oncology. Our Bern campus specialises in bacterial and viral technologies, where cutting-edge work, such as the production of lentivirus for CAR-T cell therapies, takes place. We also have our Innovation Hub in Basel, a key centre for advancing collaboration and scientific discovery.

Beyond pharmaceuticals, our MedTech division operates facilities at different sites, focusing on marketing and supply chain operations, R&D, and training. Across these locations, our strong workforce covers a wide range of functions spanning MedTech, Innovative Medicines, finance, supply chain, manufacturing, and R&D. It’s a truly integrated business, and we are proud of the role we play in the Swiss economy and global healthcare advancements.

What has been Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine’s impact in Switzerland over the past few years?

Over the last five years, we’ve successfully launched more than 30 new products or indications, which is remarkable and meaningful for patients in this country with these treatment options now being available to them. In terms of revenue, Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine is one of the largest healthcare businesses in Switzerland, standing alongside industry leaders. Each year, more than 60,000 patients in Switzerland benefit from one of our treatments—this translates to one patient accessing our medicines approximately every eight minutes.

However, the real significance lies beyond the numbers. Behind every patient is a story—of anxiety, stress, and the emotional toll that illness places not only on them but also on their loved ones. When we provide a treatment that can alleviate pain, reduce suffering, or even offer a cure, it creates a ripple effect that touches entire families and communities. This understanding of the broader impact of our medicines is what motivates us every day.

While innovation remains the lifeblood of our business, it is the human impact that truly drives our purpose.

Could you elaborate on Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine’s portfolio in Switzerland, especially the key areas of growth and the products you’re most excited about?

Our current strengths lie in oncology, haematology, and immunology, which are at the forefront of our innovation. However, we continue to maintain a comprehensive portfolio across neuroscience, cardiopulmonary, and many other therapeutic areas.

It’s always difficult to single out one area, as our portfolio is both broad and deep. One particularly dynamic area is multiple myeloma,a malignant disease affecting plasma cells in the bone marrow,

where these cells multiply abnormally and uncontrollably. . We've been committed to this field for over two decades and brought groundbreaking innovation, including one product that has now become an integral part of all lines of therapy for multiple myeloma.

However, what excites us most now is our CAR-T therapy. The concept behind CAR-T therapy—where a patient's own cells are extracted, genetically modified, and reintroduced to combat cancer—once seemed like something out of science fiction. Today, it's a reality, and we are proud to have recently made our CAR-T therapy available in Switzerland, joining countries like the U.S., Germany, and Austria, and we are working to broaden access to this cutting-edge therapy.

In addition to CAR-T, we've recently launched two bispecific antibodies, which represent another innovative approach to cancer treatment. These antibodies work by simultaneously targeting cancer cells and guiding them toward T cells, allowing the immune system to better recognize and attack the cancer. By combining these therapies—CAR-T, bispecific antibodies, and our established treatments—we can address multiple angles of the disease with incredible precision.

What significance do you see in the rebranding of Janssen to Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine?

The rebranding has indeed been a major step for us; it's more than just a change in name. While we are proud of our Janssen heritage, this shift to Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine allows us to better reflect the breadth of our capabilities. It enables us to showcase our full footprint, spanning both pharmaceuticals and medical technology. This is crucial because Johnson & Johnson is not just a pharmaceutical company—we are a leader in both sectors, and that combination is at the heart of what makes us unique.

It's also a moment for us to reaffirm our core strengths and our deep commitment to the Johnson & Johnson Credo, which continues to guide how we operate globally. I remember when I joined the company 20 years ago, seeing the Credo prominently displayed during my final interview. It made a lasting impression on me because it wasn't just a statement on a wall—it truly shaped how everyone works together.

Switzerland has long been a leader in scientific research, yet we are now seeing countries like Belgium, the UK, and Spain conducting more clinical trials. What's your take?

This trend is certainly concerning, both for Switzerland and for companies like Johnson & Johnson. Switzerland has always been a hub for cutting-edge science and clinical trials, and losing ground in this area is troubling. Securing clinical trials is not guaranteed—it's highly competitive, and the benefits for a country are immense. Patients gain early access to life-saving treatments, clinicians get hands-on experience with the latest innovations, and the healthcare system as a whole benefits from early exposure to new therapies.

Switzerland offers something unique in this space: reliability and quality. While the cost of conducting trials here might be slightly higher than in other regions, the return on that investment is far greater. Swiss clinicians and investigators are known for their consistency and professionalism. If they commit to recruiting a specific number of patients or delivering results by a deadline, they meet those commitments. This dependability is invaluable when running large-scale phase 3 trials or fast-moving phase 1 studies, where delays or inconsistencies can have serious repercussions.

The challenge we face is twofold: we need to better communicate Switzerland's value proposition to global companies like Johnson & Johnson, while also ensuring that Swiss research sites understand we are eager to collaborate. Other countries are actively investing in attracting clinical trials by offering incentives, tax breaks, and targeted funding. The world isn't waiting for Switzerland to catch up, and we need to be aware of that. We have some of the world's best scientists and clinicians, and we need to showcase that excellence. The more clinical trials we attract, the more the global research community will recognize Switzerland as an essential destination for clinical research.

What are the current challenges around access, pricing, and reimbursement of medicines in Switzerland?

There is an important conversation happening around whether patients in Switzerland are receiving timely access to innovative treatments. This process is complex, involving two interconnected elements: regulatory approval through Swissmedic and the pricing and reimbursement system overseen by the Federal Office of Public Health (BAG). Swissmedic does an important job, maintaining high standards of public health by rigorously evaluating new therapies. However, unlike broader European markets governed by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Switzerland operates independently, which introduces certain challenges and delays.

One key issue is the submission gap—on average, there's a 244-day delay between when a medicine is submitted to the EMA and when it is submitted to Swissmedic. This gap stems largely from the connection with the second stage of the process: reimbursement. The team at Bundesamt für Gesundheit (BAG), tasked with determining the value of new medicines and negotiating pricing, does good work, but they are using outdated tools and methodologies when assessing innovation. Science has progressed rapidly over the past few decades, and the mechanisms for evaluating innovation have not evolved at the same pace.

Currently, negotiations that should be resolved within 60 days are averaging 301 days. This extended timeline delays patients' access to essential medicines and raises concerns about the system's ability to accurately assess the true value of new therapies. Not only are patients affected by these delays, but the healthcare system may also miss out on the benefits of groundbreaking innovations or allow less effective treatments to be reimbursed. For example, Switzerland currently has access to only about half the medicines that are reimbursed in Germany.

The industry, including our trade association Interpharma, is actively working with government bodies to modernize this system. It's a complex issue, but one thing is clear: Switzerland's pragmatic approach gives us hope for positive change. We need a system that keeps pace with scientific advancements, one that balances all interests and reduces delays. While the solution may not be perfect for every stakeholder, the goal is to develop a framework that improves access and ensures patients benefit from the latest medical breakthroughs in a timely manner.

What role do you see digitalization playing in the modernization of Switzerland's healthcare system?

Digitalization can be transformative for Switzerland's healthcare system, yet it's an area where the country has lagged behind other markets. One of the primary reasons for this is Switzerland's federal structure, where 26 cantons operate independently. This fosters innovation in different ways but also leads to fragmentation, slowing down the widespread adoption of digital solutions. Another factor is the concern over data privacy and security, which has been heightened by past data breaches both in Switzerland and abroad. Understandably, people are cautious about how their medical data is handled, and this highlights the need for a robust legal and security framework. That's why initiatives like DigiSanté are so crucial. This initiative not only sets common standards and legal frameworks but also aims to improve infrastructure and, equally important, engage the public to increase acceptance of digital solutions in healthcare.

If we can successfully implement digitalization, the benefits are immense. It will reduce healthcare costs, minimize waste, improve diagnostic accuracy, and prevent unnecessary treatments. Digital tools can also help avoid harmful drug-drug interactions—a significant issue in any health system, including Switzerland's. Moreover, streamlining administrative tasks would allow more resources to be directed towards patient care rather than bureaucratic processes.

Switzerland has been slow to embrace digitalization, and there are some countries that we wouldn't want to be trailing behind in this regard, yet we are. This should prompt us to reassess our position globally and act with greater urgency. . Addressing digitalization, alongside modernizing our outdated pricing and reimbursement systems, will be key to placing Switzerland back at the forefront of healthcare innovation.

Since taking on your role in December 2022, what are your primary goals and aspirations for 2024 and 2025?

From a business standpoint, I'm most excited about the opportunity to bring new innovations to the market, particularly because these advancements directly impact patients' lives. On a leadership level, I'm equally committed to fostering the growth and development of my team. It's incredibly rewarding to see people evolve in their careers, gaining new skills and experiences that help them excel. I take this responsibility very seriously, knowing that their professional growth not only shapes their careers but also influences their personal well-being, financial security, and the lives of their families and loved ones. Helping them succeed is something I'm genuinely passionate about.

For Switzerland, I look forward to further advancing critical discussions around modernizing the pricing and reimbursement system. This is essential to ensuring patients have faster access to innovative treatments. Additionally, maintaining strong bilateral engagements with the European Union will be crucial for the healthcare sector, and I'm keen to see Switzerland continue to strengthen these ties. Another area of focus is enhancing Switzerland's position in research and clinical trials, ensuring that we can attract and deliver cutting-edge R&D to the country. It's going to be a busy and exciting year ahead, but there's a great deal of optimism for what we can achieve moving forward.

As we conclude, is there a key message or final thought you'd like to share?

As we often discover, when you encounter something new, you often see it with fresh clarity. That’s how I feel about Switzerland.

People admire Switzerland for obvious reasons—the quality of life, the breathtaking landscape, the economic stability. But what many don’t realize is that none of this came by chance. Switzerland didn’t stumble into success; it earned it through relentless hard work, innovation, and a deep commitment to collaboration. Take the country’s federated system, for example—it fosters innovation but also exemplifies how people work together for the greater good.

One of the things that stands out to me is how the Swiss approach even the smallest details. For instance, when a train arrives, everyone waits patiently for passengers to disembark before boarding. It’s a simple gesture, but it speaks volumes about efficiency and mutual respect. In my home country of Australia, there’s often a scramble, with people trying to get on and off at the same time, creating unnecessary stress. It’s a small but powerful reflection of how deeply ingrained these values are in Swiss society.

In Australia, we’ve long referred to ourselves as the “lucky country,” largely due to our natural resources, isolation, and stability. But Switzerland isn’t a lucky country. It’s a country that has made its own luck, and that’s something I deeply admire. However, maintaining this success requires constant effort. The world isn’t standing still, and we can’t afford to either. While Switzerland has achieved remarkable things, we must keep striving—whether in society, the economy, or healthcare—to ensure this progress continues. If we rest on our laurels, we risk losing what we’ve worked so hard to build.

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