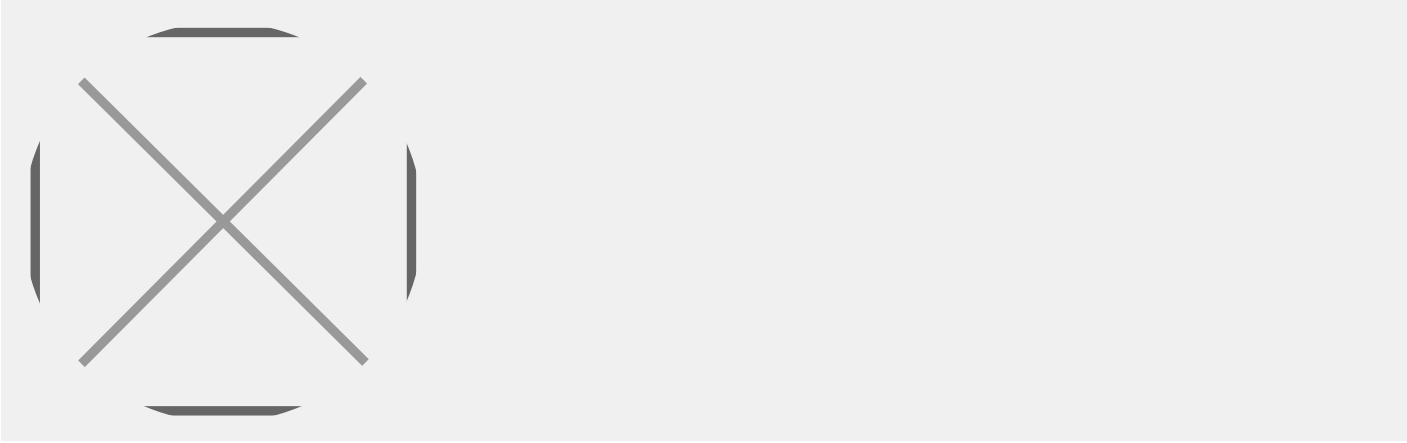
Interview with Samantha Pearce, General Manager UK and Ireland, Celgene UK and Ireland



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samantha-pearce-general-manager.jpg

Celgene just announced very impressive second quarter results for its global operations, with a 38% increase in revenue partly led by strong growth in Europe. Within the global performance of the company, how would you assess the performance of the UK in 2010/2011?

This year has been somewhat of a milestone year for the Uk affiliate. Following the success of obtaining NICE approval for, REVLIMID back in 2009 we have also now achieved NICE approval for VIDAZA in March this year. VIDAZA is an innovative product for patients suffering from myelodysplastic syndromes (MDS). These patients have few treatment options available, and as such there has been a great clinical need for new treatment advances. On the back of our success with Revlimid and NICE's recent approval of VIDAZA we have grown the organization from 54 employees in 2010 to 90 in 2011. This increase has enabled us to expand our field force and medical teams. . There is exceptionally strong clinical demand for Vidaza and now that the funding is available we expect to see strong uptake in UK, mirroring what we have already seen in the other markets in Europe. This demand is evident already with sales of Vidaza six times the level this time last yearReimbursement through the NICE process does take longer in the UK but having achieved reimbursement we are very excited about the opportunity that patients can now fully benefit from these medicines. Growth in the first half of this year has been close to 40% vs the same period last year. .This is fantastic news for us because we are aware that our products offer significant benefits to patients and it is extremely gratifying to know that after all the hard work to bring the product to market, it is finally available to patients.

Speaking about the challenges of the UK, this has been characterized as a market with the slowest uptake for innovative products couple with some of the lowest prices in Europe. How is Celgene leveraging its success in such an environment considering your specialization for rare diseases?

First and foremost, what makes a difference is that Celgene is truly committed to ensuring that patients have access to our products. It is always going to be a difficult environment to be able to convince the various reimbursement and funding bodies that they should invest and fund products like ours that can be rather expensive. In our commitment to seeing this happen we are persistent and creative to engage all the relevant stakeholders that will ultimately take the decisions. It is essential for us to understand where they are coming from and vice-versa. We knew from the beginning that it would be a long journey because the therapeutic areas that our products operate in are quite complex. These are areas in which the patient numbers are small and the clinical data does not always fully exist, which means that it has to be modeled and this adds an element of uncertainty that NICE does not appreciate. Finally there is also the fact that our medicines provide benefit in orphan diseases which means there are often no other established treatments available. This means it is very difficult for us to prove cost effectiveness through NICE's traditional QALY assessments as there are no readily available comparators. Overcoming all these hurdles takes a lot of hard work, but with Vidaza we knew that we had a very strong case and we also had the support of the clinical community and patient groups. The truth is that everyone believed in our product from a clinical perspective because of the strength of data, this is not something you can simply turn your back on. Ultimately, we all wanted to work together to make sure that patients had access to this treatment and this took a certain amount of flexibility from both sides. I am glad that Celgene is the type of company that is prepared to think more broadly and creatively to ensure patients obtain access to its treatments.

Along with VIDAZA what else will be driving growth in the UK market?

Our expectation is that 2011 will be the last year for at least the next 5 years that we won't be launching a new product or significant new indication. In a way, we are glad that we haven't had any product launches this year because this has allowed us to focus on ensuring we maximize the success of Vidaza and Revlimid and that we make the organizational changes we need to make to ensure we are in the best possible shape to maximize the success of the opportunities we have in 2012. This has involved the recruitment of a lot of new people. We have been able to attract fantastic talent to Celgene in the UK both in the field and in the office, bringing specific new skills and capabilities to our organisation as well as potential leaders of the future. REVLIMID will continue to be a major growth driver for us over the next few years as we gain new indications in multiple myeloma, MDS, lymphomas and solid tumors. Also in the area of heamatology we have Istodax and Pomalidomide, both products with exciting potential.

Beyond that we also have the solid tumor franchise that came from our acquisition of Abraxis Bioscience in October 2010. This is our first foray into solid tumors and is a great opportunity for Celgene to build its expertise in this area ABRAXANE is an exciting product currently licensed for metastatic breast cancer and with the opportunity to benefit patients with other solid tumours Finally, we also have our immunology and inflammation franchise that will be developed in the longer term. Unlike many companies, our challenge is not to determine where our growth will come from, but rather to ensure that all these significant opportunities are managed most effectively so that we can deliver the promise these innovative medicines offer to patients.

Given Celgene's rapid growth in the UK over the past year, what are some of the managerial challenges that you have been experiencing?

This is truly an exciting phase of the company's growth. Much of my focus since I joined Celgene last year has been on organizational development and making sure that we have the appropriate structures to handle the rapid growth that we are experiencing. Being able to do this while at the same time ensuring that the people that work at Celgene are motivated on a daily basis is a really exciting challenge. Celgene is a very fast-paced working environment and we look to attract people that like to work in such an environment. Ultimately we need to strike the right balance during this period of rapid growth, delivering the changes needed without making people feel that they work in a different company after those changes are implemented. People join Celgene for some specific reasons and we need to hang onto the corporate culture that distinguishes us and attracts people to work for us.

One of the most important things for me is to understand the unique culture of Celgene and what engages people to do their work every day. I need to ensure that I am tuned into that and have a regular dialogue with employees about these kinds of things. When we plan to make changes it is important to make sure that everyone understands why we are doing them and how it will help us continue to be successful. It is also important to provide people with open access to contribute to these changes through their own feedback that voices what they find is working and what is not. My senior team and I view the management of our growth not only with the objective of delivering exceptional performance, but also in terms of creating an environment in which people feel they have the best opportunity to build their career. Particularly this year, because we have expanded our operations so quickly, we have invested even more energy into maintaining the same corporate culture and listening to each other to prevent us from losing the essence of the company. It's all about talking and listening to each other so that we can build the organization that we believe in and are happy to work for.

What distinguishes Celgene from other pharmaceutical companies? What makes you so special?

When most people think of Celgene they will think first of all about our exceptionally exciting portfolio of innovative medicines . In general I believe this is what first attracts people to knock on our door. When people get to know us a little better they find that the most differentiating factor of the company, and the one that initially attracted me, is the culture of Celgene and the values that drive that culture. Due to the nature of our products, our company is extremely patient-focused and requires that we build a very strong affinity with them. Passion for the patient is one of our central values, and I know that perhaps you might hear this often from other pharmaceutical companies, but at Celgene it really is central to the way the company operates and behaves
The other defining factor of the Celgene culture is the appreciation of and investment in people. This is particularly true at an affiliate like ours where we don't develop or produce the products. Ultimately the value that we can bring lies in the quality of our people and how effective they are at ensuring these life-changing treatments get to the patients that need them. Celgene employees are people that appreciate a high level of empowerment, work openly and collaboratively across functional boundaries and are genuinely excited by what they do. We also appreciate people that have the courage to try new things and that possess a great entrepreneurial spirit. This was embedded in the company culture since the days of the founding fathers that took the risks that have made us what we are today and our job is to ensure that we keep that legacy alive and build further on it. Of course running an organization in this way also demands a high level of trust amongst our people and believing that we are all here for the same reason.

Given the challenges of market access in the UK, how has Celgene been so successful in making their products available to patients and how will this change under the new VBP pricing scheme?

There is still a while to go before we fully understand the new value-based pricing scheme. The reality is that the reimbursement environment in the UK will always be a challenge, but what encourages me about the VBP discussion is that the rhetoric is centered on innovation. As long as Celgene remains committed to providing truly innovative products that add value to the health of patients, then I think our aim will be parallel to that of the authorities.. In this sense, Celgene has an advantage in introducing our products because they target areas that tend to have significantly higher unmet needs. I am naturally an optimist about this issue, because I believe all the stakeholders involved in the discussion about access and reimbursement agree that providing patients with access to innovative, life enhancing treatments makes sense. As long as we can express our voice and have our input, then I am confident that we will end up with a system that allows for increased access to truly value adding innovative products.

While the pricing environment and access to orphan drugs is still defined, what role have patient groups played for Celgene's operations in the UK and how are you strengthening such partnerships?

We have very good relationships with patient groups in the UK and work with them hand-in-hand to ensure that they get the best treatments for their respective diseases. It's very useful for us to use them as a sounding board for our activities to make sure that we are aligned to the needs of the patient. By bringing together their capabilities with ours, we can guarantee a more effective outcome.. The ultimate goal is to improve patient outcomes and we work together with them to achieve that.

Based on the impressive performance of the company in the last few years and the numerous opportunities being explored at the moment, what aspirations do you have for Celgene in the UK for the next five years?

Celgene has the potential to be the very best provider of innovative treatments for rare diseases that have a high unmet need, and this is exactly what we aim to do. Specifically in the UK we are currently at a stage in which we are setting the standards for the way in which we operate. We have already managed to attract great people into the organization, and so far the company punches well above its weight in terms of the feedback of how we are perceived by customers. Last year we won PMEA 'Company of the Year', and that is primarily down to our investment in people and in developing a really positive culture. We do an awful lot to bring our people together so that there is a genuine sense of team spirit where people work well together because they have an affinity and trust for each other. We come together to support the community as well as to support each other, often in realizing personal ambitions; such as a team of us deciding to run the Berlin marathon together for our charities Myeloma Uk and MDS UK! This is also about challenging ourselves and pushing each other to explore different areas, whether on a professional or personal level. It is due to this culture that I expect Celgene to become an organization that leads in its therapeutic areas while maintaining the company as one of the best places to work.

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