Interview: Hendrik Kühne – Secretary General, Luxembourg Pharmaceutical Association (APL)



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Founded just five years ago, the Luxembourg Pharmaceutical Association (APL) was created in response to the divergence of Luxembourg's pharmaceutical regulatory environment with Belgium. At present, Secretary General Hendrik Kühne's primary objective is to build a stronger dialogue and greater trust with the authorities, such that the industry can be involved in discussions regarding new regulations or policies prior to their enactment.

The Luxembourg Pharmaceutical Association (APL), established in 2011, is certainly one of the youngest innovative pharmaceutical associations in Europe. Why, after many years without a pharmaceutical association, was the APL eventually created?

Up until 2009 the Luxembourg pharmaceutical market mirrored that of Belgium quite closely. With relevant legal and regulatory issues being handled within the Belgian Pharmaceutical Association (pharma.be), Luxembourg had no association of its own. Nevertheless, over time, the Luxembourg pharmaceutical environment has slowly but steadily become divergent from the Belgian model and as a consequence, it became necessary to concentrate more particularly on Luxembourg

Moreover, in 2009, the Luxembourg Minister of Health and of Social Security had asked to speak to a single entity when addressing issues with regard to medicines. This idea was strongly supported by Luxembourg's physicians' association (AMMD). Thus, in November 2011, the APL was formally founded.

From an international perspective, it seems Luxembourg has very good quality of healthcare, and that significant investments have been made to ensure a solid healthcare infrastructure. What is the APL's role in helping to ensure the sustainability of this system?

Luxembourg indeed has one of the best performing public healthcare models in Europe. Patients have access to a broad range of healthcare services provided by the system.

Our aim is to support national authorities in keeping this positive model working and to ensure its sustainability. We offer expertise and detailed knowledge of the innovative pharmaceutical environment, so that policies and technical regulations can be taken based on the most recent insights and facts & figures.

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How would you characterize market access in Luxembourg?

Legally, market access in Luxembourg depends on the country of origin of any given medication. Almost all of the medicines are being imported out of Belgium, France and Germany. Thus access in Luxembourg cannot happen any quicker than in the country of origin. And our national authorities often follow the decisions taken by other authorities.

In general, market access is good in Luxembourg, and patients are having an easy access to new and innovative medicines. On the other hand, Luxembourg is a small country and there are some particular risks with regard to access to innovative medications for such a small unit. On this topic, we are trying to work closely with decision-makers in order to preserve a system that guarantees rapid access to innovative medicines for the Luxembourg patient.

If we take a wider view, considering the role the pharma industry plays in the economy and Luxembourg's economic development strategy, how is the pharmaceutical industry viewed in Luxembourg?

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Pharmaceutical companies are viewed quite positively, and the government is very open to dialogue with the pharmaceutical industry, particularly in terms of attracting research activities and investments. In 2014 for instance, we met twice at the level of the deputy prime minister and minister of economy to discuss the government's interest in attracting investment and financing for public research institutions from the pharmaceutical industry.

In terms of the economic footprint of the innovative pharmaceutical industry in Luxembourg, this is obviously in line with the small size of the country. There are no manufacturing sites in Luxembourg, and most companies run the Luxembourg operations under a “BeLux” organization, so the industry’s administrative presence is quite limited.

However, things start to move. Some of our members have started to run significant logistics operations from Luxembourg, covering Europe, Africa, and even Asia from their local distribution center here. There are several advantages to running such logistics operations from Luxembourg, including the newly dedicated pharmaceutical hub that LuxairCARGO has built at the Luxembourg international airport. Some high ranked senior logistics executives from pharma companies have commented that it is the best pharma logistics hub they have seen in Europe. Which is great for a possible expansion of the logistic activities here.

The life sciences industry is one of the six strategic sectors targeted by Luxembourg’s innovation strategy. How has the APL helped to attract and foster life science innovation in Luxembourg?

Our main activity in support of the Luxembourg life science industry is to promote and advertise to our member companies the research that is taking place here. To this end, we have organized visits in Luxembourg’s research institutions on behalf of the Prime Minister of Luxembourg. Last year we hosted a number of the senior research scouts from leading innovative pharmaceutical companies for a guided visit of Luxembourg’s R&D facilities. In the past we have also supported a few events that sought to promote research partnerships, including a “Venture Lunch” intended to connect researchers with potential investors.

When these senior research professionals from innovative pharmaceutical companies have visited Luxembourg, what has been their reaction?

Many reacted positively surprised. Obviously, they had been briefed by us before their arrival. So there was not much of a surprise as to the numbers and the context. But all kept very positive impressions of their visits to the Luxembourg Center for Systems Biomedicine (LCSB) and meeting the director Prof. Rudi Balling, along with other leading researchers in Luxembourg like Catherine Larue at the Luxembourg Institute of Health (LIH).

Some might argue that Luxembourg’s efforts come too late, having fallen too far behind other innovative hubs for the life sciences. Why is this not the case?

From our – very humble – point of view, we can’t confirm such a statement. As an innovative industry, the pharmaceutical industry is always looking for new ideas and new partners to work with. From that perspective, as long as you can come up with a few innovative ideas and some impactful research it is never too late.

Of course, Luxembourg is a small country and as such we can’t compete in most areas of life sciences – rather we must focus on a few subjects where we can do well, and my understanding is that Luxembourg’s leading research institutes like the LCSB and LIH are among the top centers in their specific fields. If and when these institutes generate ground breaking research in their areas, then there will certainly be meaningful opportunities to collaborate with innovative pharmaceutical companies in the future.

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