Interview: Christina Nageler – Managing Director, The Austrian Self Care Association (IGEPHA)



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Christina Nageler, managing director of the Austrian Self Care Association (IGEPHA), the representative voice of the Austrian OTC community, provides an insight into the obstacles associated with the sale of OTC products and the change required in the Austrian mentality towards self-care. Furthermore, she highlights how an effective OTC system relieves overall stress in the healthcare sector, as well as the challenges faced by the pharmacy sector as the digital online sales revolution sweeps across Europe.

Could you please introduce the Austrian Self Care Association (IGEPHA) to our international readers?

IGEPHA was founded on the 12th of October 1967 and today we consist of around 80 domestic and international companies that sell over the counter (OTC) products. OTC is classified as non-prescription medicines, lower class medical devices, food supplements, dietary supplements and a range of cosmetics. Our role is to be the active voice within the Austrian healthcare community to support our members and ensure the OTC sector is moving forward.

Currently we are focused on a couple of key areas. One main hot topic is distribution channels as last year a ruling was passed allowing Austrian pharmacies to sell products online. Another area we are focused in is increasing the number of switches present on the Austrian market, which are substances that have moved from prescription drug to OTC status. Austria at present has a

significantly lower amount of OTC products available to the population than other European countries.

How would you compare the Austrian OTC environment to the rest of Europe?

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It is a more traditional environment, with very strict laws allowing the sale of OTC products only through pharmacies. Furthermore, the number of OTC products available to Austrians is quite low compared to other mature markets.

Does IGEPHA want to change distribution laws?

Our role is to ensure patients are able to obtain their medicines as easily and safely as possible. The availability of a pharmacist in every outlet where OTC products are sold is the perfect environment for our consumers. The chance to ask questions while in the meantime receiving recommendations and support is clearly an advantage from the consumer perspective.

The current distribution system, like any system, has its pros and cons. Despite this, IGEPHA members rely heavily on pharmacists' knowledge and expertise. We are in close contact with the pharmacy chamber and appreciate any initiative to further train staff and communicate with pharmacists during their studies, ensuring in the future they can educate the Austrian population effectively.

What is the Austrian population's mentality towards self-care?

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From a doctor perspective, we see they would rather prescribe drugs rather than patients going down to the pharmacist and purchasing – for example – a simple cold syrup.

From a patient perspective, you have to look at how the system functions. On one hand, the Austrian mentality views healthcare as a given right as we pay for the system within our wage; therefore, we believe the government should pay for everything. On the other hand, a recent Austrian survey indicated the public would rather treat a minor ailment themselves, rather than wait to see a medical professional. Only around ten percent of people prefer to see a doctor at all times; therefore, we see a real shift in the mentality towards embracing self-care, and now we must stimulate this mindset. Nevertheless, it will be a challenge.

What role do pharmacists play?

Pharmacists are the link between patients/consumers and doctors – therefore- we have to train them adequately so they are able to recommend to patients the correct OTC treatment. This will help alleviate that overriding fear that patients using OTC drugs are not correctly treating themselves.

In what capacity will a strong self-care sector in Austria help alleviate the stress on the entire healthcare system?

Time and money! For every euro spent in self-care, it saves the entire system EUR 5.20. If you take a step back and look at the bigger picture you realise a patient going to a pharmacist for a minor condition not only saves doctors time, but frees up the doctor's attention for a patient that has a life threating disease. Focusing spending on more serious conditions would offer more flexibility to the national healthcare budget.

All in all, it is easy to understand how better self-care creates a positively charged domino effect throughout the entire healthcare system; although we still must ensure patients are treating themselves correctly.

The growing trend in the OTC market is online digital sales, which is extremely prominent in powerhouse nations like Germany and the UK. Is Austria ready for such a revolution?

Current Austrian legal restraints do not make it easy to capitalise on the online sale trend. In fact, it is easier for a German company to sell online to an Austrian person, rather than an Austrian company to do the same. Furthermore, online sales have been part of German and Czech pharmacy operations for already many years; therefore, Austrian companies are always playing catch up. It is also important to look at the structure of the pharmacy market here, which is based on individual local pharmacies – rather than – a large pharmacy chain.

What do you see in the future of the Austrian OTC market?

The overall objective is that there is a larger number of OTC substances available. Furthermore, we are looking forward to see regulation around OTC products eased, not just in Austria, but throughout Europe. In Austria, we need to take a step back and asses what works best in other nations OTC approach, and then tailor this for the Austrian market. Overall the challenge – and goal – is to create a comfortable, and more liberal, environment for our members to operate in.

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