Interview: Robin Rumler – Country Manager, Pfizer Austria



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Prof. Dr. Robin Rumler, country manager of Pfizer Austria, discusses the evolution of their operations, especially since taking over the TBE and meningitis vaccine production plant, as well as the challenges facing the entire Austrian healthcare system today. Furthermore, he provides solutions to create a sustainable future for Austrian healthcare, allowing Pfizer, and the entire pharmaceutical sector, to leverage their innovative world-class treatment options and ensuring patients benefit in the long-term.

We met with you last in 2012, how have your operations evolved since then?

There have been a lot of exciting changes! In 2012, we were solely responsible for marketing and distribution but this all shifted in 2014 and we now handle two legal entities: marketing and distribution of our products and production. This came about with the company´s global vaccine business acquisition from Baxter, and now we have one of Pfizer's 16 European production sites in Orth at the Danube (Lower Austria). This has helped us grow within Pfizer´s global network. Besides that, in Austria we are still an early launch nation, and continue to collaborate with local healthcare players to keep this important status.

In Austria, we are very active in launching products – within the last 12 months we launched new medications in the fields of breast cancer, leukaemia and rheumatoid arthritis, as well as a new

antibiotic. In September, we are expecting another exciting oncology drug for rare skin cancer to be launched. Really it is one product coming after another in a diverse range of therapeutic areas, and it keeps us all very motivated in our daily activities.

In clinical research, Pfizer globally has currently 99 programs consisiting of 70 different molecules in its pipeline, with 20 clinical trials being conducted within Austria. The Austrian academic study group (ABCSG) has proudly been chosen as a key partner for one of Pfizer's biggest breast cancer trials: except for the US, global study management of the 340 million EUR (405 million USD), 4,600 patient clinical trial is carried out by this institution. This is a great example of Austria's abundance of opportunities and world-class academia and many internationally recognized key opinion leaders. This is a chief reason Pfizer decided to place such an important clinical trial within a mid-size country.

All in all, whenever you have all these various activities within a country for a leading company such as Pfizer, you put the nation on the map. Our teams do their best to promote our company´s endeavours and we are now steadily growing, very motivating after many important products lost their patent over the last years. This growth, coupled with our production site and clinical programs, gives us a strong base to build on. Furthermore, we are extremely active within industry associations as we do not want to wait for change, but be the ones that help shape the Austrian healthcare ecosystem.

What are the challenges that the Austrian healthcare system is facing today?

Today it is clear that pharmaceutical pipelines are full, compared to a few years ago when patent losses affected the entire industry. Therefore, we can focus on modern therapies, such as immune-oncology, gene therapies and personalized medicine. Despite all these positive advancements the entire global health network, including Austria, is facing the challenges of adjusting to incorporate these innovations into our healthcare systems.

For example, in Austria certain sectors, such as retail, medication or the hospital setting, are financed by individually allocated buckets of funds. Therefore, there are lots of finance channels, and what ideally, we need is more of a centralized finance stream. As you can imagine this process is extremely difficult and the discussions with our partners who are the decision makers in this process are not easy. We need to convince them to build this long-term strategy together. At times, our ideas do collide as some partners believe pharmaceutical costs are rising too rapidly and they want to see high speed compression of spending.

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I believe there are three key areas we need to collaborate on to construct this long-term vision. Firstly, we have to move from more repairing medicine to preventive measures. Secondly, we must build the Austrian populations healthcare literacy. Lastly, we must formulate healthcare goals for key therapeutic areas, such as diabetes and strokes, as we already understand how these diseases evolve and can paint an accurate picture of Austrian patient´s health in 2030. This is done by openly discussing with pharmacists, physicians, nurses, industry leaders, key opinion leaders, self-care groups and patient advocacy groups about a certain area and finding a strategy for the long-term. We must be transparent and share information and publish our achievements – in turn – leading to the construction of a long-term pathway for patients.

When pharmaceutical companies start developing a new treatment option it costs billions of dollars and can take up to 15 years to be launched, and quite often it doesn't even reach this point. Saying that, this has led to very effective treatments for diseases such as HIV and HEP-C that decades ago were thought unimaginable. These are incredible achievements and we need to convince the chief decision makers within Austria to push this innovation. We need to reform the healthcare system to incorporate new modern therapies as even if the costs seem sometimes high today, in the long run they will save money, and create a sustainable healthcare system that benefits patients.

What can be done to create a more efficient system?

Firstly, in Austria there are 22 sick funds. From my perspective, it is an overly complicated system, and as I said, we must centralize the funding structures for more transparency to understand where money is being spent.

Secondly, in Austria there are 7.6 hospital beds per 1.000 inhabitants, an incredibly high number considering Denmark, for example, only has 2.7. I believe we should remove departments in hospitals that are not needed and create specialist centers; for example, oncology, cardiovascular diseases, pain and surgery. This would make not only the system cheaper to run, but give patients better care. The money saved can then be distributed throughout the retail sector to improve innovative therapies entering the market or to strengthen medical care.

In summary, the system is good, but overly complicated and we need to simplify it all to make it easier and more efficient for patients. The overriding goal is to ensure Austrians feel that the healthcare system is designed for their better good and can be considered world-class.

Despite the challenges in the Austrian healthcare system Pfizer is prospering. How do you differentiate yourselves to achieve your success?

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I would not say we are doing anything overly different to other companies in areas such as gaining market access. We do what is expected of us as we look to be pro-active and voice our opinions within associations and the greater healthcare community, while in the meantime continuing Pfizer´s Austrian R&D and production operations.

What we try to achieve is show Austria that Pfizer is here and we are undertaking what is perceived as best practice. Every year we build our sustainability report by speaking to our stakeholders to understand how they see Pfizer and what they expect of us. We speak about our achievements and the importance we have within Austria with our 550 workforce and Pfizer´s global investments here, such as the aforementioned breast cancer clinical trial.

The big news since last time we met is the diversity of Pfizer Austria into production. How has this transition period been?

In short, we took over the production plant from Baxter in 2014 for NeisVac-C®, a vaccine for protection against meningitis as well as FSME-Immun®, a vaccine for protection against TBE. I have to say this was good business from Pfizer headquarters and we have already undertaken some upgrades and invested in a new warehouse. This has in-turn given Pfizer a bigger footprint here so we are a louder voice in the entire healthcare environment.

How does Pfizer contribute to creating a sustainable healthcare system well into the future?

We will continue to bring our most innovative products to Austria and stay authentic in our behaviors; transparent, honest and clear. We want to be seen to be as leading best practice and continue to collaborate with our partners to improve the overall healthcare system. We must all strive to have the same overarching goal in thinking long-term, so in the end Austrian patients can receive world-class innovative care well into the future.

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