

“Cutting edge science and the possibility of helping people who really need it keeps me driven. It was this dynamism that originally attracted me to healthcare and still motivates me today”

**Professor Dr Andrea Pfeifer,  
Co-Founder and CEO,  
AC Immune**

**What originally set you off on your career path? Was the plan always to go into the pharma and biotech industry?**

My wish is to help people to prevent or treat diseases. I have a parent with a chronic condition and wanted to apply my scientific curiosity to create something in a space where no treatment is available. I have always been interested in healthcare and how the brain works, going back to my time at Nestlé researching the positive impact of coffee on brain function, and even earlier. It may not have always been the plan to go into biotech, but it was something that was always a possibility.

**You studied for a PhD in Toxicology, Cancer Research from the University of Würzburg. Did you originally plan to go into cancer research? What changed?**

Yes – I really wanted to find a cure for cancer. I had a significantly positive experience in cancer research where I learnt that precision medicine can be the beginning of a whole new treatment paradigm. It was really pure chance that I ended up at Nestlé, as I seized an opportunity when it became available.

**Do you find you can still apply what you learnt in the field of cancer in your current work?**

Absolutely. Apart from the principles and practice of research, there is the concept of combination therapies, which are now common in cancer, HIV and other diseases. Many key opinion leaders have begun to support the idea that combination therapies are going to be required to successfully treat Alzheimer's disease. I also believe this will be the case as Alzheimer's is complex with many contributing and potentially causal factors. As such, it may be difficult for a drug with a mechanism of action focused on a single part of the disease process to make a meaningful impact.

**You helped to co-found AC Immune back in 2003. What was the drive behind starting your own company and how did you get it off the ground?**

When the scientific founders of AC Immune came along and showed me the technology, I was really interested, although they had no product, no money, and no business plan. I took a moment to reflect on the future, and I had already achieved quite a bit and decided it was time to do something else. The science and our scientific founders gave me the courage and conviction, and so I decided that my next challenge was to dedicate quite an important part of my life to finding a treatment for Alzheimer's disease. I strongly believed that we can make a difference – and I still do. The first three months were hard, until we had a business plan. Then, a few months later, we raised financing and the company took off.



**How does the company stand today, and what is your relationship with it? Have things evolved over time?**

AC Immune is in a good position. We are well funded, have one of the industry's broadest pipelines in neurodegenerative diseases, with validating partnerships with big pharmaceutical companies such as Eli Lilly. We have developed a five-point Roadmap to Successful Therapies for Neurodegenerative Diseases that outlines our R&D approach (treat early, target Tau, more homogenous populations, precision medicine, target neuroinflammation), and based on this, we will continue to make a significant contribution in the search for treatments for these debilitating conditions.

**Prior to AC Immune you served as the Head of Global Research at Nestlé. Was this a departure from your earlier and later work? What made you make the leap?**

Yes, for the obvious reasons that it's a senior role in a huge company and different industry – so many things were different from research and biotech life. I made the move because it looked interesting and was a challenge, which are two things I find very motivating. Having said that, there are some clear links that run through my career: the interest in healthcare always remained and being involved in Nestlé's venture capital fund for life sciences was very good preparation for AC Immune. I was quite used to meeting with investors, explaining what we are doing, why it is important and what it is going to change, and why they should put their money in.

**How did the work differ, and how has it informed what you have achieved since?**

Clearly, managing more than 600 people in a multinational is very different from what I do now. But many principles remain the same – looking for solutions, finding the right people, and managing them to ensure they are happy and perform – and I am still applying much of what I learnt in from that management experience. I still go to work every day with the same excitement and enthusiasm for what I do. And the venture capital fund, as I've mentioned, was really great preparation for being CEO of a biotech company.

**You've racked up an impressive amount of accolades over your career, including the World Economic Forum Technology Pioneer award and the Swiss Entrepreneur of the Year award from Ernst & Young, both in 2009, and voted one of the top 10 women in biotech by FierceBiotech. What do these awards mean to you?**

I'm very proud to receive each of these awards, which are a recognition of making a difference and also of the pioneering work we as a team are carrying out at AC Immune. So, although the awards are received by me, they are really achieved by the team. It is more important to me that we make a real difference to patients by finding treatments for neurodegenerative disease than it is to receive an award.

**In a career filled with achievements, what keeps you driven, in the past and today?**

Cutting edge science and the possibility of helping people who really need it keeps me driven. It was this dynamism that originally attracted me to healthcare and still motivates me today. I also find the commercial aspect very interesting, in how we have to justify our work and research to investors – that is the acid test of the standard of our work, and it is something I am always challenging myself to live up to.

**Is a work/life balance something you put a lot of value in? How do you manage your own?**

Yes – work/life balance is important not only for personal happiness, but also effectiveness in the workplace. You cannot contribute fully if you are exhausted or distracted thinking about problems at home. Companies and authorities must do more to ensure the flexibility to balance career and family. It is a priority for us at AC Immune, and I'm very proud that we are doing our part. For me personally, of course, I have a very hectic schedule with a lot of travel and meetings. I try and ensure that when I am not at work, I'm not distracted – I am fully present in what I'm doing with my family and friends.