



A passionate entrepreneur and researcher: Andrea Pfeifer

«Diversity requires Openness»

Andrea Pfeifer, Co-founder and CEO of AC Immune, talks about vision, success and courage.

Interview: Beni Meier

Biotech entrepreneur Andrea Pfeifer explains the success of AC Immune and her fascination with entrepreneurship. She talks about the significance of Switzerland as a business location and this year's SEF motto.

Ms. Pfeifer, your vision is nothing less than a cure for Alzheimer's, one of the most threatening diseases of our times. Why will you succeed in achieving that?

AC Immune's approach is to transfer precision medicine into neuroscience. Because what genes are to cancer, structurally altered proteins are to neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's. My vision is that in five to ten years, people will be checked not just for cardiac function, diabetes and cholesterol but also for Alzheimer's, and then will get specific treatment based on their overall diagnosis.

For many years, both start-ups and big international pharma companies have been researching into effective Alzheimer's cures and treatment possibilities. So far, all of them without success. What is it that AC Immune is doing

better than the competition?

We have a technology platform that allows us to take an early diagnosis to the market and possibly also the therapy for it. In addition to research into Alzheimer's therapies, AC Immune also started out early to build two other strategic pillars: one in the field of Parkinson's and other rare brain diseases, the other in diagnostics. In this particular area, we recently announced another successful development and this year we'll begin the first patient studies with a new specific PET tracer (a positron emission tomography imaging process) for early detection of Parkinson's disease.

As a researcher, university professor and entrepreneur, you're continually active at the interface between science and entrepreneurship. Which role fits you best?

I feel good in both roles and wouldn't like to be without either of them. Particularly when building a biotech company, it's important that along with the entrepreneurial direction you always keep the science in focus.

As an entrepreneur, what can you learn from science? Are there parallels between these worlds, and what are the biggest differences?

What the two worlds have in common is that they both require courage, precision, commitment, strong leadership and a lot of hard work. As an entrepreneur, you must also be very willing to take risks and it's certainly helpful to have a reliable gut instinct. (laughs)

What are currently your biggest entrepreneurial challenges at AC Immune?

The company has grown very quickly in the last few years and soon will have 100 employees. Adapting all processes and procedures to this and keeping them up-to-date is a big job. Even with our current infrastructure, we're coming up against barriers and are continually having to find new solutions. In the last 15 years we've learned how to deal with challenges of this kind – it's certainly one of our strengths.

Why, after being committed to the global corporation Nestlé, did you want to become an entrepreneur? What fascinates you about entrepreneurship?

After my time at the Nestlé Research Center, I wanted to go back to my roots and be active in a medical research environment. After my studies in Würzburg (Germany), I worked in the US for many years, at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), in cancer research. So when 15 years ago I got the chance to help set up AC Immune, it was a unique opportunity for me to work in an area that is close to my heart and in which we can really achieve something for the people affected: the patients and their families.

What's your recipe for entrepreneurial success? Is there a simple formula?

On the one hand, it's important for me to have a vision and a clear strategy. And on the other hand to ensure that both are understood and taken forward by our employees. Because that's the only way we can be successful together.

AC Immune has been listed on the New York Stock Exchange since 2016. How important does Lausanne as a location continue to be for you?

The Lausanne headquarters, with its proximity to the EPFL and the University of Lausanne, is very important for AC Immune. In recent years, the Lake Geneva region has become a real biotech hub, especially in neurosciences, and this provides us with great inspiration.

Women continue to be under-represented in Swiss business leadership positions. As a female CEO, you're even a pioneer. What has to happen for this to change?

It has to be made easier for women to get to the top. The time when a woman had to choose between family and work really should be in the past. Very often in my career I've been in situations where I was the only woman and that wasn't always easy. So as a professor at the University of Lausanne, I stand up for female students and researchers and would like my experience to give them perspective and courage.

The SEF.2018 motto is “Hello from the other side” and is dedicated to diversity and openness as key success factors. What does the SEF theme mean for you personally and AC Immune?

AC Immune has just around 100 employees, who come from 20 different countries. That alone shows our great diversity. Of course it requires openness towards people from a very wide range of cultures.

SWISS ECONOMIC FORUM

The Swiss Economic Forum (SEF) is Switzerland's leading business conference and what is already its 20th edition will take place from 7 to 8 June 2018. Every year, 1,350 leading personalities from business, science and politics meet in Interlaken to actively exchange opinions and engage in cross-sector dialogue. SEF's jubilee edition is being held under the motto of “Hello from the other side” and is dedicated to diversity and openness as key success factors. The SEF is also the occasion on which the Swiss Economic Award is presented.

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Original interview in German.