

Not only speed matters, quality does too. A principle that is critical to saving lives at the German Life Saving Association (DLRG). It is also a conviction that drives Dr. Dirk Bissinger: alongside his role as Chief Quality Officer at Merck Healthcare, he volunteers in water rescue operations at both the national and European levels. © Daniel-André Reinelt (DLRG)

“The Right Steps at the Right Moment”

19/10/2026 Finding a balance for his demanding role as a senior executive in the pharmaceutical industry does not take long for Dr. Dirk Bissinger. Volunteer service fills his free time and gives the chemist a deep sense of purpose. As he puts it: “Saving lives is at the heart of everything I do.” He leaves nothing to chance – neither in his professional career nor in his volunteer service to society.

Meeting Dr. Dirk Bissinger at his workplace in Darmstadt, Germany, the conversation quickly turns to action rather than theory. Taking initiative. Making a difference. That is better than complaining. Yet there is not a trace of haste about him. Instead, he comes across as an experienced and level-headed leader. A thoughtful and patient listener, yet quick and deliberate when it comes to execution. As Chief Quality Officer for the Healthcare business unit of the international science and technology company Merck, Bissinger keeps a busy schedule. Frequent travel is part of the job. He oversees overall product quality across 20 manufacturing sites and 60 subsidiaries worldwide for the German family-owned

company founded in 1668. That, in brief, describes the scientist's profession, one that focuses on protecting people's health.

His true calling is closely connected to that mission. A highly trained swimmer and member of the German Life Saving Association (Deutsche Lebens-Rettungs-Gesellschaft, DLRG) since childhood, he now serves as Vice President of the organization and as President of its European umbrella organization. With more than 640,000 members, DLRG is the world's largest volunteer water rescue organization. Its work ranges from teaching children and adults how to swim to safeguarding beaches along Germany's North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts, lakes, and rivers, as well as searching for missing persons and carrying out specialized disaster response operations such as emergency evacuations during floods. Climate change is creating new challenges.

Bissinger's journey began back in 1974 with his first swimming lessons in Wiesbaden-Biebrich. At the age of five, he ended up in a DLRG swimming course almost by chance at his father's suggestion. Other swim clubs had temporarily stopped accepting new members. Because he enjoyed swimming so much, he became a member of the respected lifesaving organization immediately after earning his first swimming certificate. His preparation for volunteer service began a few years later in the youth organization. After turning 18, he quickly earned numerous additional qualifications, including training director, technical director, and instructor for boating licenses. While studying nuclear chemistry, he spent his summer weeks working as a lifeguard on the beaches of Germany's Baltic coast, particularly in Lübeck Bay and on the island of Fehmarn, both popular destinations for vacationing families.

Asked today to compare his career and volunteer work, Bissinger's answer is straightforward: "Ultimately, both activities pursue the same goal: positively influencing lives and even saving them. The difference is that people in professional life receive a paycheck at the end of the month. In volunteer work, the reward is gratitude. And that gratitude does not always need to be expressed in words. We are motivated by the bright eyes of a child who has just learned to swim. Or by the thankful look of an exhausted surfer we have pulled from cold water."

One thing unites both of Dirk Bissinger's roles: quality matters in his professional work, and it matters just as much in lifesaving. "Quality as a guiding principle ensures that the right steps are taken at the right moment. That requires standards, but also proper training combined with a healthy dose of common sense," says Bissinger. What matters most to him is that "people understand the 'why' and not just the 'how' or the 'what.'"

Bissinger is equally convinced of another principle: "Quality is rarely the result of a single person or a single action. It is a team effort. Teams are generally better, stronger, and more successful than individuals. What matters is both close coordination and a certain degree of diversity within the team. True diversity is what creates a super team."

In the pharmaceutical industry, priorities such as compliance, patient safety, and robust processes are paramount. Can these principles be compared with volunteer work at DLRG? "Absolutely," Bissinger replies without hesitation. "Our water rescue operations depend on very similar factors. Compliance

becomes adherence to national and international standards. Patient safety becomes the professional medical care of rescued individuals until they can be transferred to ground or air emergency services. And robust processes include our training standards and operational procedures. Only these measures allow us to guarantee consistent quality in everything we do. One example is rescuing swimmers who have been caught in strong currents. In such situations, we often use specialized rope rescue techniques that follow standardized procedures every rescuer knows and has mastered."

The Chief Quality Officer also sees parallels in DLRG's swimming instruction programs: "The instructor standing by the pool must follow standards that culminate in examinations and certification, whether for swimming badge assessments or for the training of instructors themselves." Bissinger adds, "Quality is a principle that allows us to keep improving. Whether you are a pharmaceutical manufacturer or a lifesaving organization, safety and quality go hand in hand."

Even though human effort does not necessarily have to be expensive, Bissinger believes quality never comes free of charge. He says: "Good quality is less expensive than poor quality. You can see that in attributes such as longer durability, lower production waste, or factors such as greater reach and availability. Water rescue services also require reliable equipment we can trust completely. Because financial resources are limited, we must remain innovative even under cost pressure. For example, DLRG uses remotely operated camera drones in the air and underwater where they truly add value. They are particularly useful when searching large areas or viewing the water from above. At the same time, we continuously question where innovative technology actually delivers a quality advantage. It certainly does during search operations. But when we directly witness an emergency situation, such as on a beach, we obviously do not wait for a drone to take off. In those situations, humans are still much faster and more effective."

Merck and DLRG share another important trait: both have earned the public's trust over generations. Both are well-known and dependable brands. And both fulfill a promise to save lives, albeit under very different circumstances. As Bissinger explains: "Patients who use Merck medications rely on us and on our high standards. Things are not all that different on the water. In both cases, it is about being there for people, looking after them, and caring for them."

Before concluding the conversation, we ask whether Dirk Bissinger has role models who inspire him in his career and volunteer work. His answer: "One of my mentors once said, 'Don't try to boil the ocean.' There is a lot of truth in that. We should focus on what we can genuinely influence and change. Sometimes it is the small things that mark the beginning and then quickly grow into something much bigger."

Info

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