

Pharmaceutical logistics and the cold chain

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The life sciences industry has shaped a specialised segment of the logistics market in Basel. Medicines, vaccines and biological products require transport and storage at controlled temperatures, documented handling and protection against counterfeiting and theft. The rules of Good Distribution Practice, adopted in the European Union in 2013 and incorporated into Swiss law through the medicinal products legislation, require wholesalers and logistics providers to maintain quality systems, qualified premises and validated transport routes.¹ Logistics companies in the region have built temperature-controlled warehouses and developed expertise in the documentation that regulators expect.

Most high-value pharmaceutical shipments leave Switzerland by air, through Zurich, Basel-Mulhouse and the large European hubs, and by road to the distribution centres of the European Union. The Rhine plays a smaller role for finished medicines, although containers with chemical intermediates and raw materials for production arrive by water. The EuroAirport, whose legal and economic situation Chapter II examines, has developed a cargo business with a focus on express and pharmaceutical freight that benefits from its proximity to the production sites on both sides of the border.²

The pandemic of 2020 and 2021 tested the pharmaceutical supply chains of the region. Vaccine production and distribution required capacity for deep-frozen storage and transport that had not existed on a comparable scale, and the logistics providers in the Basel area took part in building it. The experience increased attention to supply chain resilience, a theme that has since entered the policies of governments and companies alike.³

Pharmaceutical logistics also intersects with customs and export control law. Because many active substances and intermediates are listed as dual-use goods or as precursors of chemical weapons, their export requires permits under the Goods Control Act. Chapter III and Part G have

examined these rules in detail.⁴ For logistics providers, the practical consequence is that customs declarations, permits and screening against sanctions lists form an integral part of the service they provide to their pharmaceutical clients.

1 Notes

1. Guidelines of 5 November 2013 on Good Distribution Practice of medicinal products for human use (2013/C 343/01); in Switzerland the Ordinance of 14 November 2018 on Licensing in the Medicinal Products Sector (MPLO/AMBV, SR 812.212.1) and the Swissmedic guidance on GDP. To be verified. ↩
2. On the cargo activity of the EuroAirport Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg and its role in the transport of pharmaceutical products, see the annual reports of the EuroAirport. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the logistics of COVID-19 vaccines and the role of Swiss logistics providers and production sites in the region, see the reports of the industry and of the Federal Office of Public Health. To be verified. ↩
4. See Part G, Chapter V, sections on export control and on the chemical and biological weapons conventions, and Chapter III of this Part. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-pharmaceutical-logistics-and-the-cold-chain