Shan Wu – General Manager, AstraZeneca China Hong Kong & Macau



I believe it is our responsibility as the market leaders in Hong Kong to shape the ecosystem

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AstraZeneca, the largest overseas pharmaceutical company in mainland China by sales, is also the market leader in Hong Kong and Macau, a territory overseen by General Manager Shan Wu. She outlines the fundamentals behind the company's success in Greater China, how AstraZeneca is working to bolster Hong Kong's innovation and technology ecosystem, and some of the synergies that can be leveraged from the Greater Bay Area initiative.

How did you move through the ranks within the pharma industry and arrive at your position today?

I am Chinese-born and graduated as an organic chemist before moving directly into the industry with a sales role in oncology and haematology at Johnson and Johnson. My seven years at J&J – helping develop the Chinese portfolio across sales, marketing and market access roles – was a fantastic experience and put me in good stead for my next role at Roche. While with Roche, I gained further experience in the oncology field, helping commercialise one of the company’s innovative cancer products and applying the knowledge gained in my previous roles.

A few years later the opportunity to return to J&J arose at a time when the Chinese government was starting to offer reimbursement of oncology medicines for high unmet needs which required new pricing structures. As part of the prostate cancer team, it was an honour to work on including

J&J medicines in the national reimbursement list.

When Actelion was acquired by J&J, I became Actelion’s general manager for China to finalise the integration of the new portfolio in rare diseases. This was an exciting assignment and we were able to achieve double-digit growth, expanding the number of Chinese patients receiving these rare disease therapies.

The next step, in 2021, was a move to AstraZeneca. I began managing the breast cancer franchise in China. The fact that my team contained over 400 professionals was a key attractor to this role and a fabulous experience in terms of managing and motivating such a large group. This then led me to my current role as general manager for AstraZeneca Hong Kong, reporting directly to the China country manager.

AstraZeneca offers a unique innovation model within the industry based on establishing partnerships and adapting the portfolio to each market in which it is present. Through these partnerships, we can create great results and find win-win solutions.

How has the experience of managing the 400-strong breast cancer team in Shanghai shaped your leadership approach?

Most of the team worked in sales and – given that the company had recently lost out on some large tenders – morale was not as high as it could have been when I joined. Early on, I made the decision to meet the entire team and attempt to better understand the challenges each of them was facing. This meant that my initial period in the role was focused more on motivation than strategic planning, but building a motivated team is nevertheless crucial to driving performance improvement.

Secondly, given the many hierarchical layers in the business, information would normally get passed down to middle managers and subsequently passed down to other staff. However, I chose to build up a direct communication platform so that everyone at the company could get important news and updates. Communication is vital to building culture.

Thirdly, because most of the staff were salespeople, I knew that they did not need all of the strategic information, but only that which helped facilitate their work. We therefore worked to simplify the message and create clear and precise goals.

What have been the main drivers behind AstraZeneca becoming the market leader in Hong Kong?

First and foremost, AstraZeneca China Hong Kong boasts a strong portfolio, especially in oncology, which makes up half of our business here. Moreover, we benefit from the market framework that allows us to bring global innovation to Hong Kong relatively early, even compared to mainland China.

Secondly, for oncology and some primary care products we facilitate scientific knowledge transfer between Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China. This does not directly impact our business, but these strong partnerships have grown awareness of the company among KOLs and have had an important impact within the scientific community.

Lastly, developing effective business and people strategies can create a strong foundation for market leadership. Continuously evaluate and adjust based on market dynamics and organizational performance to maintain a competitive advantage and drive long-term success.

Is it important to have a first-in-class oncology treatment to gain reimbursement and market access in Hong Kong?

Yes, and Hong Kong in general acts very much like a Western market, so being first class is important because it means you gain access to all existing patients. This comes with the challenge of reimbursement as authorities need to prepare in advance to make a budget available for these new innovative treatments. Therefore, we apply for market access early on to make sure everything is ready to go on launch day.

Within oncology, on which types of cancers is AstraZeneca having the biggest impact for patients?

Lung cancer is a strong area for us, as well as breast cancer in which we became market leaders earlier this year thanks to a partnership with Daiichi-Sankyo.

Within haematology and oncology, we have new medicines and this year we are moving into gastrointestinal cancers, and more specifically liver cancer. This is a more Asia-specific disease or an area where there is a bigger burden, so it is important that mainland China and Hong Kong have these medicines for the patients. This is something about which we are very excited.

Have you undertaken any product launches since taking over this role? How different is the product launch experience in Hong Kong compared to mainland China, where most of your career experience was gained?

In February we launched a respiratory product for primary care, and in oncology, we have launched several new indications for our existing products this year. Additionally, we will soon be launching the aforementioned liver cancer products.

I would say that product launches in Hong Kong are quite different from those in mainland China. Hong Kong and mainland China have separate legal and regulatory systems. Understanding and adhering to the respective regulatory frameworks and business environment is crucial for a successful product launch in either location.

Some companies are looking to enhance the connections between their Hong Kong affiliate and health infrastructure across the Greater Bay Area. Some policymakers are also promoting this push; what is your take?

The GBA has a population 10 times greater than Hong Kong, so it is an attractive market but it is not easy for Hong Kong companies to expand into the region. We have two products there currently, but the usage is quite limited and only for small private hospitals, not speciality centres. We are looking to introduce medicines for high unmet needs, in areas where the diseases are not common, and it is hard to find the patients due to low diagnosis levels.

AstraZeneca also has a portfolio of rare disease products. What is the ecosystem like in Hong Kong for orphan medications? And in the Greater Bay Area?

Hong Kong is a relatively good market for rare diseases if we compare it to other developing ecosystems. There is funding support provided by the government and the payer is willing to invest in this area, which is not the case everywhere in the world as affordability is always an issue. While there are some restrictions on reimbursement, Hong Kong has made a good start. Since the acquisition of Alexion, the rare disease portfolio has been a big part of our local business.

The situation is quite different in GBA as there are currently no actors willing to pay for rare disease medications. We would like to explore any opportunity to help those patients in need.

What steps are you taking to maintain AstraZeneca's market leadership in Hong Kong?

AstraZeneca has been the market leader in mainland China for four years now, and this is because we are not only providing the therapies but also supporting through patient-centric solutions and partnering with key stakeholders and local governments. We are looking to implement some of the mainland China approaches in Hong Kong, and I think this is important as being market leaders we should do something to help shape the market and facilitate its growth.

We have a few examples of concepts we want to bring to Hong Kong from mainland China. Firstly, we have set up a new global R&D China centre in Shanghai, and this has helped the country catch up with the global AstraZeneca pipeline because for business to grow the product range must broaden. Secondly, there is an industry fund that has already invested in early 20 companies over the last 2 years, which has enriched the AstraZeneca pipeline and empowered the global R&D operations of the company. Thirdly, mainland China AstraZeneca has an incubation centre to develop and mature these start-up companies.

We believe that by bringing this three-pronged approach to Hong Kong, these concepts can work off each other to deliver to the local government's needs, develop the local innovation ecosystem, and find specific solutions for the region's problems, which at times can be quite different to global health issues.

As I mentioned before, I believe it is our responsibility as the market leaders in Hong Kong to shape the ecosystem, and we are happy the Hong Kong government is offering a clear pathway to building the Hong Kong innovation and technology landscape.

Having said so, what is the strategic importance of Hong Kong for AstraZeneca?

Recently the global CEO, Pascal Soriot and the regional heads came to Hong Kong, so this is a good sign they are thinking about us as a part of their future plans. When you look at Hong Kong, it has a lot to offer, with world-class universities and a flourishing and well-managed healthcare system. We must collaborate more with stakeholders to make our impact bigger and show our HQ we are a place to invest in for the future.

Furthermore, we want to work with the Hong Kong government as the biopharmaceutical industry market leaders to drive forward innovation, position it as an innovation hub, and act as the gateway between China and the Western world.

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