Interview: Hee-sun Lee – General Manager, Merck Pharmaceuticals Hong Kong



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Merck Hong Kong's Hee-sun Lee gives her first impressions of the Hong Kong market, her main priorities, upcoming product launches and tapping into the territory's R&D ecosystem.

Hee-sun, having joined Merck Pharmaceutical Hong Kong in February 2018 from the South Korean affiliate, what are your first impressions of the market compared to South Korea?

South Korea is a predominantly reimbursed market with a National Health Insurance (NHI) system, funded by a compulsory National Health Insurance scheme that covers nearly the whole population. The Hong Kong healthcare system is composed of two sectors: a government sponsored public sector, and a private sector. Within the public sector, it is important to obtain reimbursement or government funding for drugs to enable more access for HK patients. For the private sector, we introduce innovative devices and integrated treatment solutions that go beyond the drugs to offer a higher quality of service.

Both are mature, developed markets with an efficient healthcare systems and all of Merck's main products from the global portfolio are available.

In South Korea, for one of our oncology products, Erbitux, we have a risk-sharing program with the government, which is one of the reimbursement schemes in Korea that eases financial burden on the patients significantly. In Hong Kong, we are part of the Samaritan Fund, which helps the underprivileged access medicines. Recently, in August, we successfully expanded the criteria for

access to this drug. Previously, the fund was only offered to liver-limited mCRC patients but now it covers most mCRC patients. This means that more patients can benefit from the drug. This is also in line with the government's public health initiatives. For instance, The Colorectal Cancer Screening Program has been made regular and extended to cover Hongkongers aged between 50 and 75. Also, the Hong Kong government has fully subsidized the biomarker testing for personalized treatment.

As a new General Manager in Hong Kong, what are your main priorities?

I believe it is important to not simply focus on the short term but outline a mid to long term plan to help the company look ahead. Our mission is to provide innovative treatment solutions that bring real and measurable improvement to patients' lives. Therefore, I am extremely excited about the number of great product launches for Merck globally, which will also be launched in Hong Kong soon to benefit patients here.

Merck is investing heavily into its oncology, immuno-oncology, and immunology pipelines. Our anti-PD-L1 Avelumab was approved by the US FDA in 2017 as the first and only FDA approved immunotherapy for patients with metastatic Merkel cell carcinoma (mMCC), a rare and highly aggressive skin cancer with poor survival. This is a critical development, as there was no second-line treatment available prior to this product. Only half of the patients would respond to chemotherapy and even then, chances were that the cancer would typically progress within three months. This anti-PD-L1, part of a strategic alliance with Pfizer, has already been launched in more than 38 markets globally including the EU and Japan. We expect to launch in this new indication in Hong Kong soon.

The patient need for this drug is clear from the fact that globally, within 120 days of the first approval, approximately 400 patients around the world have been treated with Avelumab.

Merck globally had another product launch last year, a single disease modifying therapy for the treatment of highly active, relapsing multiple sclerosis (MS). As you know, MS is an area in which Merck has a proud history. What is even more innovative is that this is the first and only oral product on the market that is also a short-course oral therapy, and only requires a maximum of 20 days of treatment for a sustained disease control for 4 years: twenty days of oral dosing in the first two years, and no treatment required in the next two! This is the closest experience to life without MS for patients. In Hong Kong, we have spoken to one of the leading medical practitioners, an expert in the field of MS, who is aware of this global launch and is very excited for it to reach Hong Kong; as he sees it as a paradigm shift in the treatment of MS. This also demonstrates our continuing commitment to serving patients in MS.

In addition, in June 2018, our Glucophage XR metformin was approved by the Hong Kong Department of Health for pre-diabetes. This is highly significant because roughly one out of six people in Hong Kong are pre-diabetic. 70 percent of them eventually progress to Type 2 Diabetes, so it is important that we can offer them an early treatment option.

We are also proud of our strong heritage in the area of fertility treatment. Merck not only offers a complete portfolio across the reproductive cycle, but has continuously generated innovation with ground-breaking treatment options and devices as well as Fertility Technologies. This explains why we are the market leader globally. We work very closely with the Hong Kong Society for Reproductive Medicine to help couples achieve their dream of having a baby. With our innovations in fertility, globally, an estimated 2.5 million babies have been brought into the world.

With so many new launches on their way, how do you structure your team here to manage efficiently?

For me, as a new GM, I really do feel that people are key. I am working to build a very transparent and collaborative working environment, as well as to attract, retain and develop talents. We conduct many workshops and training programs and share best practices to foster a learning environment. What is helpful is that the culture in Hong Kong is adaptive, and the team here is very open to new ideas.

To prepare for the upcoming launches, we will define clearer roles and responsibilities, be more efficient with the organization structure, and have more development programs for our employees.

New launches and sustained growth would require an expanded team and I would like to ensure that Merck becomes an even more attractive company to work for, by providing more benefits, career development opportunities for our employees. At Merck, we actively promote Short Term Assignments across different functions and countries, for people development.

To share a personal story here, at the beginning of my career, I had applied to a few multinational pharma companies to pursue a global career. Merck was one of my first job interviews and when I entered the Merck office and had a long discussion with the interviewers to learn more about Merck, I absolutely fell in love with Merck’s culture and was so convinced it was the right fit for me that I cancelled all my other interviews with other companies. I hope that other people would have the same experience at Merck.

Hong Kong is a mature but very small market. What is the significance of the Hong Kong affiliate to global operations?

Hong Kong is a strategic market for Merck globally because the government supports the need of

bringing innovative drugs to market, which makes it one of the earliest market registrations within Asia. Merck is focused on speed to market for the benefit of patients worldwide. We also offer early access programs and named patient programs to enable access to break-through therapies prior to registration.

In addition, as Hong Kong is technologically advanced with a sophisticated market, many global initiatives are easily brought into Hong Kong, and Hong Kong is also a great place to pilot new initiatives. For instance, within the pre-diabetes space, we have plans to introduce a new technology offering integrated solutions 'beyond-the-drug' to patients in Hong Kong. This is something very exciting for us.

Hong Kong is also known for its strong R&D ecosystem. How can this support Merck's global R&D efforts, given that Merck already has two of its global R&D centers in Beijing and Tokyo?

Merck is aiming to introduce more resources and investments from global to Hong Kong, particularly when it comes to clinical trials. We have engaged Hong Kong KTLs for company-sponsored trials recently, which is not only great in terms of increasing investment in the local affiliate, but also in terms of providing physicians in Hong Kong with clinical experience so that there is already a good platform for these products when we do launch them. In addition, products are launched in Hong Kong before mainland China, so the Hong Kong physicians can then share their experiences with their mainland Chinese colleagues. Many Hong Kong KTLs are also globally recognized and on Merck's global board of scientific and academic advisors.

Hong Kong is also widely acknowledged for its robust healthcare infrastructure and systems. The only single drawback is that Hong Kong's small population size means that the pool of eligible subjects is small and patient recruitment can be very competitive.

In terms of organizational culture, Merck has a strong brand driven by the idea of 'curiosity'. How do you foster that culture of 'curiosity' within a predominantly sales and marketing affiliate like Hong Kong?

We must always have curiosity in the way that we do things, whether it is R&D, sales, marketing, or business strategy. We can always improve, and I want our team here to keep exploring new ways to bring more value. New channels, new technologies for treatment solutions are also very important and helps us not only to differentiate ourselves as a leading science and technology company, but also to bring more benefits to patients.

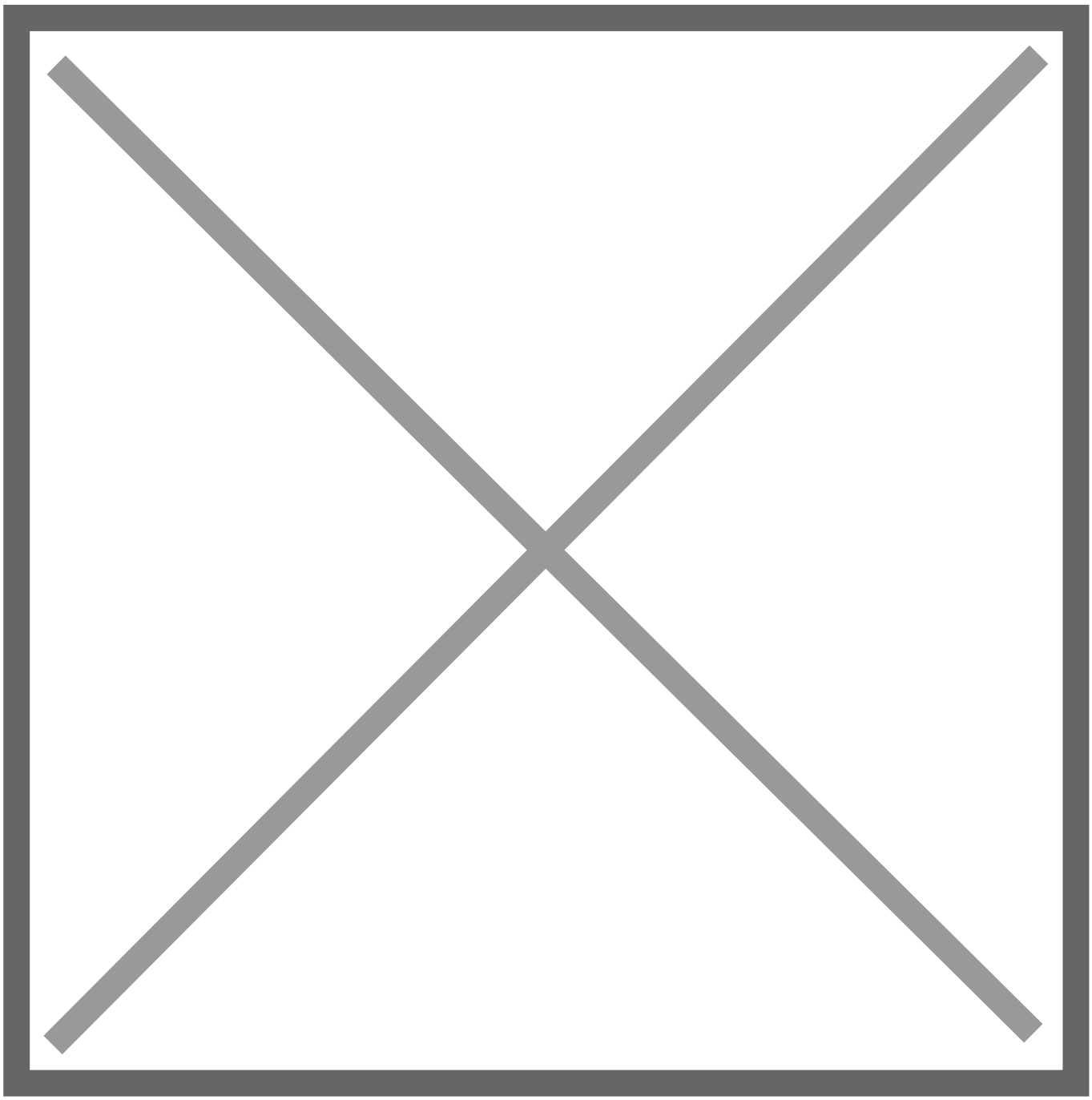
For instance, Merck's growth hormone treatment Saizen has an injection device called EasyPod™. It is the only injection device in the market that tracks adherence. The EasyPod™ Connect system

is able to transmit patient adherence data directly to the relevant healthcare practitioner so that they can monitor their patient's medication adherence. It also has many features such as an alarm function and growth charts to provide more benefits and value to the treatment experience.
Even in terms of sales, we have introduced creative ideas like using Augmented Reality IPAD detail aid that helps visualize the structure of our unique pill. We continuously look for more interesting ways of doing things and delivering our message.

On a final note, after six months on the job, do you have any advice or tips to share with new General Managers?

Firstly, I would like to share a tip someone else told me when I started: prioritize. As a new General Manager, you will have a lot on your plate, so you have to take a step back, think about what is important and what is urgent, and do those first. Do them first and do them right, while keeping the big picture in mind.

Secondly, I would say, be open and encourage teamwork. Never think that you have all the correct answers. With the right people in the right place, and established trust within the team, you will be able to work together and achieve greater success 'as one'. When I joined the Hong Kong affiliate, as a foreigner, I invested a lot of time to listen to my colleagues in Hong Kong and really understand them, because all cultures and ways of doing business are different. We continue to openly give and receive feedback for improvement. Ultimately, we are all here to work together with the same goal of helping patients live a better life. As we celebrate Merck's 350 years' anniversary, we are excited to continue driving innovation to create, improve and prolong life.





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