Tian Wee Ng – Managing Director (Asia-Pacific), Pierre Fabre Medicament



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Tian Wee Ng, managing director (Asia-Pacific) for Pierre Fabre Medicament, shares insight on how the business has evolved in the region, moving from an opportunistic approach to a more strategic one, since his appointment in 2016. He also discusses the value of Pierre Fabre's oncology portfolio for the region and China, as well as the significance of the Chinese market to regional and global operations.

Tian Wee, as managing director (Asia-Pacific), could you share a little about Pierre Fabre Medicament's operations in the region?

To provide a little context on Pierre Fabre globally, we are the second-largest dermo-cosmetics laboratory in the world and the second-largest, private, French pharmaceutical group globally. Our founder, Mr Pierre Fabre, was a pharmacist by training, and this is reflected in the company's market leadership position in France for OTC products sold in pharmacies.

In 2017, Pierre Fabre generated EUR 2.3 billion in revenues, of which 62 percent came from its international business. Our R&D efforts are focused on oncology, dermatology, consumer health care and dermo-cosmetics. Pierre Fabre has around 11,000 employees worldwide, owns subsidiaries and offices in 47 countries, and enjoys distribution agreements in over 130 countries.

Eight-six percent of Pierre Fabre is owned by the Pierre Fabre Foundation, a government-recognized, public-interest foundation, and secondarily by its employees, through an international, employee stock ownership plan.

Three years ago, I was appointed to manage Pierre Fabre's pharmaceutical operations in the APAC region. For a long time, Pierre Fabre operated like a traditional French pharmaceutical company and was very Euro-centric. The company's mindset toward commercial investments and activities outside of Western markets, including China, was more opportunistic than strategic. When I joined, Pierre Fabre was only actively present in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, China and Australia. We have since regained the rights to our products in some key APAC markets, and are looking forward to growing the organization further in the region.

Could you share more about Pierre Fabre's presence in China?

In the 1990s, Pierre Fabre was one of the earliest entrants into China among all multinational pharmaceutical companies. We entered the mainland Chinese market with a single oncology product, NAVELBINE® (vinorelbine). At that time, there were far fewer cancer treatment options, such that the introduction of our drug, which was clinically proven to be effective and safe, and was manufactured to the highest industry standards, represented a breakthrough and provided much-needed hope for Chinese patients, who have now benefited from this product for more than two decades.

In 2007, NAVELBINE® Oral, the oral formulation of NAVELBINE® and one of the few chemotherapies that can be administered orally was introduced, for the treatment of metastatic non-small cell lung cancer and advanced breast cancer. Given the long drug approval timelines in China back then, this product was eventually launched in 2014.

In 2017, NAVELBINE® Oral was approved for reimbursement – one of the few drugs among nearly 20,000 candidates to be considered, highlighting the Chinese regulatory authority's recognition of the usefulness and benefits of this agent.

I firmly believe that the Chinese market is still a blue ocean: there is a huge amount of potential to discover and so much more value to give. This is why global management gave me their blessing to continue breathing new life into the APAC business.

What have been your strategic priorities in the past few years to properly build-up Pierre Fabre Medicament's presence in China?

One of the most important priorities for me has been to bring new blood into the company. At Pierre Fabre, it's not just quantity that counts but quality: we need enough people but also the *right* people. We are nevertheless realistic because we are competing with bigger pharmaceutical companies for talent. To attract the best people to join us from market leaders, we need to have a very compelling story.

The story I tell is about Pierre Fabre being simultaneously an MNC and a brand-new start-up in China. By joining us, top executives will not only make a difference for patients but they can also create something from nothing within a very entrepreneurial organization. In this way, their impact may be far greater than if they had stayed in a larger organization. I am proud that, in the past few years, we have built a very strong team at Pierre Fabre Medicament China across legal, compliance, finance, sales and market access functions. Today, Pierre Fabre Medicament has all the ingredients for greater success in China: our products are exceptional, the market is ready and waiting, and we have the right teams in place.

Talent recruitment and management are probably the key challenges for pharma companies today in China. What tips do you have for your fellow managers?

Ultimately, you must offer enough value to attract them, but also be pragmatic and accept that no one stays with you forever. You must prepare for this eventuality. For every key position, I have a plan B. As a side note, I do not believe an extravagant salary is the only factor to keep people with a company – there will always be another company with deeper pockets – but we try to recognize and reward people fairly for their efforts.

Other incentives we offer include an environment ripe for active learning, and opportunities to build a career path that will lead to better pay in the future. For instance, in my role as managing director (APAC), I am able to offer top executives in China more regional operational responsibilities, which is attractive to them.

I am also very conscious of how I handle personnel departures. This is often overlooked, but how a company handles a departure is as important as how it handles a hire. It is always important to stay professional and respectful.

It is crucial to provide a nurturing environment where employees can build something together and be invested in the company's growth. This means looking for people who want to grow as individuals, as well as possess diversified skill sets. For instance, our executive in charge of compliance here actually has a background in finance.

Having outstanding talent in-house also helps to improve the company's image. Today, Pierre Fabre Medicament has a very strong, credible reputation with healthcare practitioners in China due to the quality and professionalism of our employees.

As I tell my team, we may not be the biggest, but we *can* be the greatest.

Oncology is one of the key priority areas for China today. What value can Pierre Fabre offer to Chinese patients here?

We aspire to be the leader in chemotherapy, which is still the go-to treatment for cancer. Many companies are now focusing their drug discovery on targeted therapy or within immuno-oncology, for example, which is great, but these treatments may not apply to all cancer cases. At the end of the day, chemotherapy remains the cornerstone of cancer treatment and will remain so for the foreseeable future, particularly for advanced cancers where it may be too late for novel therapies to be sufficiently effective.

Pierre Fabre Medicament provides effective oncology drugs worldwide. Our NAVELBINE® Oral product in China is of great value because it allows patients to take their treatment at home instead of in the hospital. This relieves a significant burden on both patients and healthcare systems. China's healthcare system is hospital-based, and most public hospitals are overcrowded, with no appointment system, so patients often have to wait a very long time to be seen. Oral chemotherapy restores some normality to cancer patients' lives and makes the disease burden easier to bear.

In 2015, Pierre Fabre acquired two targeted molecules that form part of a very effective combination therapy for unresectable or metastatic melanoma with a BRAFV600E or a BRAFV600K mutation, which accounts for 40 percent of all melanoma cases. It successfully completed phase III trials and was launched, firstly in the U.S. in mid-2018, then in Germany in September 2018, followed by other European countries. The combination has also received an MA in Australia, which is within APAC.

For China, our hope is to launch this therapy in colorectal cancer. Despite recent advances in screening and management, the incidence of colorectal cancer remains high and is growing, mainly due to lifestyle risk factors, both in China and the rest of the world. Globally, colorectal cancer is the third most common type of cancer in men and the second most common in women. We are currently engaged in international phase III trials.

With these upcoming launches, we have an even more compelling story in China. In terms of our company strategy, we have entered phase 2.0 – we are now rebuilding the business from the ground up. When these novel drugs hit the APAC market, phase 3.0 will begin. Armed with new confidence in our portfolio, we will also look more eagerly toward companies with mutual interests, with which we can trade products to bridge the gap between future and existing products.

To wrap up, what would you like to achieve in China, as well as the APAC region, in the next few years?

We are inspired by the success of Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetique in China, especially by their top brand, the Eau Thermale Avene line. This proves that there are great market opportunities in China that, on the healthcare side, we can also seize.

We firmly believe that Asia-Pacific is the next sustainable growth engine for Pierre Fabre in the world. As we continue to deliver double-digit growth annually, we constantly seek opportunities both internally and externally. The ultimate goal, apart from serving as a significant contributor to overall global revenue, is to build up our team in APAC to become the leader and role model for all to admire and follow.

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