BoonHuey Ee – General Manager, Merck Biopharma Taiwan



Taiwan is an interesting market on its own and is a leading player in scientific capacity within the region

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BoonHuey Ee, general manager of Merck Biopharma Taiwan, shares her story of joining the affiliate at the beginning of last year and goes on to offer insights on the strengths of Taiwan's unique positioning. Ee also highlights the excellent performance of Merck Taiwan, its dedication to the island's own biopharma ecosystem, and what contribution it can play to the group's global and regional focus on innovative science and technology.

After acting as managing director of Merck in Malaysia, you came to lead the Taiwan affiliate last year. How has the transition been for you?

My trip back to Malaysia was a short detour after spending four years in Singapore, holding a regional role, then spending several years in China which is a key strategic market for Merck. Each role I have held in Merck has been a unique experience. My regional position in Singapore required extensive coordination and leadership to meet the diverse needs of several counties at the same time. Later on, with China being such a strategic market, the expectations are high, but it can be an amazing experience if you know how to navigate the complexity of the country. Being in such a dynamic environment, I was able to learn and develop my skills quite thoroughly. Finally, upon returning to my home market of Malaysia, I was able to adapt quickly and turn the affiliate around within one year before coming to Taiwan. Each role I held had diverse focuses and needs, but

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What have been your top priorities since taking on the task of leading the affiliate?

Our priorities in Merck Taiwan are aligned with both the regional and global strategies, where we are focused on five strategic pillars. The first is to continue the growth of our core healthcare portfolio. Merck has a mature portfolio of well-established brands which are still performing well in the areas of oncology, reproductive health, cardiovascular, and central nervous system. As we continue leveraging our flagship products in these areas, we are simultaneously preparing to launch new products into the market.

In Taiwan, the affiliate has already launched two products this year – one is Merck's PD-L1 therapy for merkel cell carcinoma, and the other a fertility treatment. In total, we expect to introduce two more products in Taiwan for a total of four launches within the year. Each of the launches is in a different therapeutic area, making 2019 a very exciting year for the affiliate.

The third pillar focuses on how we can improve the local operation of the affiliate. Moving to a new country from different markets and positions, the experiences I had helped to give a fresh perspective on what can be improved on within Taiwan's organization. Merck Taiwan has been doing well and I want to continue this performance by using my outside knowledge to bring down the barriers our team is facing.

The next pillar is to concentrate on local and global R&D and drive our future pipeline in Taiwan. Staying focused on business development and innovation is a critical direction of Merck that is reflected here at the affiliate level.

Finally, the last pillar we focus on relates to our team and leadership development. At first glance, each country might appear to be vastly different with its own incomparable features. However, rather than focusing on the differences, if you peel back the initial layers, the nucleus of an affiliate is the same – the people. While there may be differences in culture and language for example, at the end of the day we all have the same motivations and desires to be respected and acknowledged for what we do. Therefore, I strive to lead the team with a clear vision, capture Taiwan's differentiation and opportunity, and embrace diversity and inclusion.

What is the strategic importance of Taiwan within Merck's operations in Asia-Pacific and how is the affiliate performing compared to its regional counterparts?

In the global biopharma market, Taiwan is ranked 21st while within the group the Taiwan affiliate is ranked 20th, so we are performing slightly better compared to overall market positioning. Moreover, in Asia Pacific, Taiwan's market size is ranked sixth in the region and Merck Taiwan's performance is ranked fifth.

Taiwan is an important business contributor not only in terms of market size but also our portfolio. Our local growth is being driven heavily by oncology, the biggest therapeutic area in this market. Merck has a very established brand which is ranked number ten globally in biopharma and has consistent positive performance here in Taiwan.

In terms of people, we have promoted a lot of talent outside of Taiwan. Just this year, we have already had three team members promoted out of the country, including regional and global positions. Taiwan is a very strong talent incubator and as a general manager, I am very proud of this. Moving forward, the aim is to continue this cultivation and encourage a culture of speaking out and taking initiative.

The affiliate's performance is excellent and last year we achieved over ten percent growth. In fact, Merck Taiwan was able to surpass the performance goals given to us by the region. This was propelled by the market access improvement we saw in 2017, including expanded indication for some drugs already on the market.

How do you leverage the fact that you are working in one of the best healthcare systems in the world?

Ensuring market access and fair pricing is an activity we emphasize within the affiliate. We invest a lot of time and effort to improving patients access to our innovative portfolio while working closely with government stakeholders including the National Health Insurance Administration (NHIA), Taiwan FDA, and the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW).

What is the role of innovative pharma as a partner to the health system in risk sharing and facing challenges like the aging population and sustainability?

As general manager, I also sit on the board of the International Research-Based Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (IRPMA) in addition to being a co-chair of the Healthcare Enhancement Committee in Taiwan's European Chamber of Commerce. In these organizations, we discuss a great deal about what we can do to partner with the government stakeholders to sustain the country's healthcare system. Like many other developed countries, Taiwan's aging population coupled with its low birthrate is a major challenge being faced today. As the industry, we raise these concerns to the government in a very transparent way.

I would have to say that the government in Taiwan is highly engaged in health conversations and are willing to hear the industry. Our forums are well attended, and the government is very responsive to the position papers drafted within our associations.

The NHI is trying to determine how to reimburse immunology – what will this mean for the reward of innovation?

From the industry's side, we can understand the government's challenge of how to incorporate this high level of innovation which will, of course, come with some costs. I am glad to see some progress; this year they started a pilot program with around 800 patients with about USD 25 million in funding for ten indications within immuno-oncology. The industry plays an important role to carry on supporting and being a partner to the government by giving input and suggestions on how to continue delivering access of innovative medicines to patients.

From the perspective of a pharma MNC, what are the key strengths and areas for improvement in Taiwan's biomedical industry landscape?

Taiwan is a country known for its very strong ICT industry which is a strong asset. Additionally, the strong science park infrastructure is proof of the government's commitment to establishing Taiwan as a biomedical hub within the region – as we see from the 5+2 Innovative Industry Policy. There is also a high level of talent and expertise in the hospitals and in running clinical trials. Taiwan has been involved in many global clinical trials, including for Merck as well. All these factors add up the strength Taiwan has in driving innovation and the biomedical scope. To further improve the level of competitiveness of Taiwan Biomedical industry, both international and local biopharmaceutical companies play an equally important role together with the government to shape the ecosystem and continue to drive innovation here.

We are actively involved in discussion with the government about what international pharma's role can be and we are suggesting that a multi-stakeholder thinktank with the local industry, MNCs, and the government be established to focus on win-win-win situations. At the end of the day, we are all competing with other countries so we should be working together to leverage the biomedical capabilities of Taiwan.

In what ways is Merck investing and playing an active role in Taiwan's biomedical market?

Merck overall is a science and technology company, in addition to our biopharma business, we have a life science and a performance materials unit. Due to the industrial set up of Taiwan, our performance materials business is very large, with three production facilities across the country. All in all, Merck has four sites in Taiwan.

Creating a biomedical hub is not just a biopharma role; together with Merck's life science unit, we are able to cover the entire value chain of biomedical development. In fact, our process solutions division in life science unit has partnered with the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) to set up a biopharmaceutical R&D training centre. This initiative is helping local companies to upscale their capabilities in biomanufacturing. Merck has a unique offering that many other companies do not have, and the government considers us to be an important partner to the biomedical ecosystem.

When it comes to clinical trials, Taiwan is always included in Merck's global trials, particularly in three areas – immunology, immuno-oncology, and oncology. Currently, we have more than 10 ongoing late phase trials in Taiwan. At the affiliate level, we also do some local R&D in collaboration with local key thought leaders.

How can Taiwan support Merck's global R&D efforts, given that Merck already has two of its global R&D centers in Beijing and Tokyo?

Taiwan's value within global operations is in innovation excellence. Our global R&D experts can work with key centers in Taiwan on new scientific developments, especially in the space of Healthcare plus technology. We are exploring a lot of areas in health and technology in terms of big data, artificial intelligence, predictive models, and discovering new ways in which we can collaborate with technology companies such as Foxconn with whom we have jointly set up an

innovation lab in this space.

What strategic objectives are you aiming to accomplish within the upcoming five years as General Manager of Merck Healthcare Taiwan?

We want to continue growing faster than the market – three times faster to be exact. We are taking a bottom-up approach to building a Taiwan 2024 strategy to help more than half a million Taiwanese patients with our portfolio. Furthermore, we will continue with the five strategic pillars that I mentioned earlier on. The foundation to ensure we can deliver this aspiration is to build a Best in Class Biopharma team that would want to take this journey with me.

What advice would you give to women in the pharmaceutical industry based on your experiences?

My advice is to stop waiting to be asked to take on leadership roles. Be authentic, be yourself, but also take the initiative to raise your hand when it comes to seizing an opportunity. It is important to be confident in your ability and desire to move forward and progress professionally. Also, go out and find a mentor who can be there to support you and offer advice. How far you can go, depends on you!

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