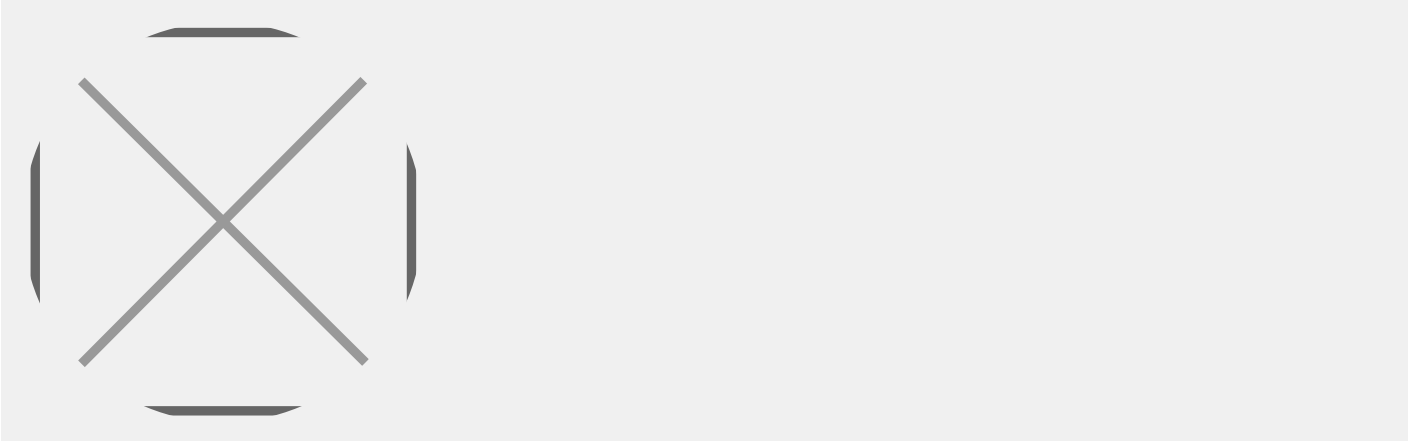
Interview: Tsu-Der Lee Chairman, Taipei Medical University, Taiwan



09.10.2013

Tags: Biomedical, IT, Taipei Medical University,

The chairman of Taipei Medical University (TMU) discusses the key challenges TMU has faced over the years, how these challenges will continue to affect the future, and what international accreditation will mean for the collaboration of TMU with international pharmaceutical companies.

Taipei Medical University (TMU) has a long history in the medical world. What is your vision for the future of TMU?

TMU was founded in 1960, and is currently one of the largest private universities in Taiwan. QS World University Rankings places us among the top 100 medical schools in the world, top 50 universities in Asia, and top 400 universities overall.

Our vision is to act as a platform for the integration of medical services, medical education, medical research, and industrial-academic cooperation. This platform—known as the TMU Healthcare System—consists of our university and three affiliated hospitals, and is supported by outstanding IT infrastructure that is unmatched in Taiwan.

What are the principal challenges for healthcare providers in Taiwan today, and how can TMU respond?

One key challenge lies in the structure of our national health insurance (NHI) system, which was designed as a kind of hybrid between social welfare coverage and medical insurance. In my view,

this design is flawed: the two should not be conflated. In Taiwan, social welfare is a matter of low taxes, and high benefit. This is not fair to healthcare providers, who wind up with a lower resource input than they need.

Taiwanese legislation allows room for healthcare fees to be increased, but thus far, congress has hesitated to take any significant action on this issue because of a fear of public backlash. Meanwhile, the recent enactment of the Second Generation National Health Insurance Act has in some ways made the environment more, rather than less, challenging.

Nonetheless, organizations like TMU are charged with making the best of the situation and identifying sustainable strategies. We have to look for efficiencies, and actually, we have done quite well in that respect. I mentioned, for instance, our IT infrastructure. We are currently holding this interview in what we might call our 'War Room'! We can centralize data and analyses from each department of each of our three affiliated hospitals right here in this space. Through industry and academic cooperation, TMU makes sure our education aligns closely with the health care industry.

What are the University's strengths as a center for clinical research?

Taipei Medical University has been working closely with various distinguished institutions in medical and biomedical fields. Our partners include the US National Institutes of Health and Academia Sinica as well as Taiwan's National Institutes of Health and Ministry of Health and Welfare. Neuroregenerative Medicine and Cancer Biology and Drug Discovery are among the TMU programs working with these partners.

Our biggest strengths are, again, our integration and our IT. Clinical trials demand clear, real-time data: at TMU, all trials conducted at any of our hospitals are overseen by a single institutional review board (IRB), and pass through a single information system that spans all departments. These clinical trials also link with genomic and translational research. Three thousand beds, one system!

We are working now towards international accreditation, which we expect to receive in December of this year. We will then be able to invite international pharmaceutical companies to join us in developing novel medicines. Our future partners will be able to leverage our infrastructure to stream quality, real-time data anywhere in the world, bringing down administrative costs and increasing efficiency.

More broadly speaking, what is your opinion of Taiwan's drug development ecosystem?

In my opinion, Taiwan is not an ideal environment to develop new drugs from A-Z. At least for now, we should focus on early-stage research, contract services, and clinical trials.

The problem is that firstly, we are a small country with limited resources. Secondly, we are constrained by our regulatory system, which on many points is not open enough. Thirdly, we are challenged by the gaps in our industrial chain. And finally, many of our knowledge centers have significant overlaps in their expertise—organizations like Academia Sinica and the National Institutes of Health often seem to conduct the same work.

It is a shame that Taiwan has strict regulations on one hand, and on the other hand, the stakeholders are too free. There is not enough integration and teamwork, and not enough focus. Government funding is too frequently channeled to individual interests, and the goal is too frequently to simply publish a paper, rather than apply technology or create a product. There are relatively weak links between research and industry.

With that said, we have seen improvements over the last three years. For instance, I am very happy to see the support of our capital markets for biotech companies. We are seeing investor attention shift from ICT to biotech. But it is up to the industry to actually deliver something—because, as they say, in a tornado even a turkey can fly. I am not sure that at this point the enthusiasm is justified. Only the future will tell!

What lies ahead for TMU?

As a private institution, we look to complement our participation in the NHI system through self-pay care, research services, and other channels. Nearly 35 percent of our income is derived from the private sector. We would like to grow this figure further. We welcome industrial partners to come speak with us, and learn what we can offer them. Also, biotech start-up companies' spin off from school will work closely with industrial leaders, venture capital, etc.

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