Interview with James Garner , Vice President & General Manager, Takeda Global Research & Development Center (Asia)

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Tags: Takeda Global Research & Development Center (Asia)

What is the global R&D vision of Takeda, Japan’s largest pharmaceutical company that recently celebrated its 230th birthday?

Takeda’s global R&D vision is committed to the discovery and development of innovative solutions that addresses unmet medical needs of patients. What distinguishes our R&D vision is an emphasis on innovation and a focus on some of the most pressing public health problems, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

In line with the four pillars of Takeda’s R&D: Urgency, Innovation, Partnerships and Measurement, we are committed to developing drugs as rapidly as possible and working diligently to find efficient ways to elevate the pipeline through novel products and compounds. In terms of novel approaches to drug development like translational medicine we are also examining opportunities to validate results quicker.

Takeda’s R&D activities are concentrated in six therapeutic areas: Cardiovascular & Metabolic, Immunology and Respiratory, CNS, General Medicine, Vaccines, and Oncology. One of our largest areas of focus is diabetes, a disease that is increasing in this region, especially in countries like India.

What are the main functions of Takeda Global Research and Development Asia (TGRD Asia)?

Takeda has four main regional hubs for clinical research — one in Illinois with responsibility for the Americas; one based in London that oversees Europe, the Middle East and Africa; one in Japan, and ourselves, headquartered in Singapore, serving as the regional hub for clinical development in Asia (excluding Japan).

Takeda now has a comprehensive regional footprint in this part of the world, with clinical development teams in Japan, Singapore, South Korea (Seoul) and China (Beijing, and Shanghai).

TGRD Asia is fully integrated into the global development organisation and is focused on non-oncology clinical development. Our strategic objectives are to help drive Takeda's products into Asia. One of our tasks is to integrate Asia into our global clinical development activities and build up a close collaboration with the commercial teams in Asia in order to ensure that what we are doing is really beneficial for the commercial market and adequate in meeting the region's needs. Moreover, we are committed to making sure that our global quality and compliance standards are applied to the studies that are conducted in Asia.

Before this Centre was established, Takeda had limited clinical development activity in Asia. Since the creation of TGRD Asia, 12% of global clinical trial subjects are now recruited in this region and we have active clinical trials in several countries/territories: China, Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, India, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand.

What have been TGRD Asia's achievements since its founding in 2009?

Our Asian business is still growing, but in each of the past three years the development team has roughly doubled in size, and Takeda is very serious about continuing to increase and strengthen its presence in Asia.

In 3 years, we have had a number of important achievements. Since our establishment we have seen over 2,000 clinical trial subjects recruited in Asia. 2011 was a particularly successful year for us as we expanded our regional development team into China and South Korea. In the same year we did 12 NDA submissions across Asia, submitted 6 clinical trial applications in China, completed our first ever phase I studies in Asia, completed the first study in Asia intended to support Japanese registration, and we completed Takeda's first ever clinical study in China. Furthermore, the phase III program for TAK-875 (a drug for type II diabetes) was launched as the first truly globally integrated program in Takeda, supporting near-simultaneous registration across Asia.

Can you please give an overview of clinical development in this region?

The short answer is growth; today almost every MNC anticipates expansion of clinical trial activities in Asia. This growth is driven by a few things. First, the increasing importance of Asian markets. For most companies Asia is a central part of the growth of their business, so it follows that R&D tends to expand in a similar way. Second, it reflects the contribution that Asia can make to global research. If you look back ten or fifteen years, Asia was a young region in terms of clinical development. Today there are a large number of excellent trial sites, and many experienced and enthusiastic clinicians. Every CRO is here, the main resources for clinical development are here and the infrastructure is the equal of anywhere in the world. Some of the sites we work with, like Seoul National University Hospital in South Korea, Prince of Wales Hospital in Hong Kong SAR, and several in Singapore, are really world class; their work is remarkable and they are comparable with leading facilities in USA and Europe.

It is true that part of the drive to Asia is determined by the commercial market, but we can’t ignore the capabilities. 10 to 15 years ago most of the companies that came to Asia were driven by lower costs. However, today, companies have an improved understanding of the advantages Asia offers, so costs are not the main driver any longer.

One of the main challenges that the industry is currently facing is a lack of talent. Is the shortage of professionals slowing down the growth ambitions of the MNC, and how are companies managing to not only recruit but also retain talent?

If you ask any of my colleagues in the region, they will probably tell you that their biggest challenge is access to talent and the difficulties in finding people with enough experience. However, it is not clear that this is actually responsible for slowing down the growth of the companies. In fact, talent in this part of the world has been growing considerably.

At Takeda we invest in talent. We work closely with diverse stakeholders in the industry to develop people. We work closely with universities to help them train young graduates and bring them closer to drug development.

Today, given the size of TGRD Asia we can’t really absorb a large number of graduates as of yet. However, we are committed to the professionals we hire and we continuously develop their skills. For instance, we always mix our younger colleagues with our experienced ones so they can actively train them. This has been very successful in helping us build our talented pool of people. Also, as the company is growing, our people are very enthusiastic to work in a truly global company where they have long-term career development opportunities. So the attraction is there, and they have reasons to stay as well.

Takeda announced the official opening of Takeda Shanghai Development Center (TSDC) this August. What will be the synergies between the two centres?

Takeda's drug development is globalised and here in this region we see ourselves as a completely integrated team. TSDC will give our regional team additional capacity, and will also strengthen our access to China. For oncology, TSDC will serve as a regional hub.

This year, in its 2012–2014 Mid-Range Plan, the Group has vowed to continue its transformation into a "new Takeda". How does TGRD Asia fit in with the new Takeda?

The 'new Takeda' reflects how Takeda has emerged as a truly global MNC, which is determined to develop new products in a global context.

If we come back in 5 years, what could we expect to see in Takeda here?

Asia will be completely integrated into our global drug development activities. I also hope to see, from Takeda and other pharma companies, more novel pharmaceutical products emerging from the Asian region. I would really like these companies to assume the challenge and have more innovation coming from this part of the world.

In three words what does Singapore represent for TGRD?

"Talent" is surely the foremost attribute of Singapore; it is a great place to recruit talented people. Second would be "environment"; Singapore has one of the best business environments in the world and its location serves as a gateway to the rest of Asia. Third would be "cosmopolitan." Singapore is extremely diverse with the myriad of cultures here.

Prior to joining TGRD Asia, you were working for different companies, from Quintiles to Biogen. What attracted you to join Takeda?

What impressed me about Takeda was the strength of the vision that the company has for Asia. I joined in the early days of TGRD Asia, three years ago, and I have been very excited to see how it has grown. Takeda has a very strong commitment to Asia and this Centre epitomises it – I am very gratified to be part of this.

As a physician by profession, how exciting has it been for you to turn the page from the medical to the business world? What is the best lesson this job has given you?

I have spent most of my career in the pharma industry but I like to think that I will always remain a physician. At the end, the principle of both jobs is the same— to help make people well. However,

in business, you have to work as a team where everyone brings their expertise. With many talented professionals around, I am learning something new every day.

What would be your final message to our international readers?

Asia is pretty much the most exciting part of the world for drug development. At Takeda, we are committed to this region and I am very proud and excited to be part of that.

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