Brian Wang – CEO, GL PharmTech, South Korea



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Brian Wang, CEO of Korean super-generics developer GL PharmTech, discusses Korea's relative strengths in different stages of R&D, and how this motivated the foundation and evolution of GL PharmTech.

What was the inspiration that prompted you to found GL PharmTech, a company based on incrementally modified drugs, back in 2002?

There are several parts to the creation of a new drug, spanning from discovery to preclinical and clinical research, and eventually registration and commercialization, and up until now the Korean industry was relatively weak in several aspects of the discovery stage. However, in the later stages of development such as formulation and clinical research, we have been quite strong for several years, on par with players from developed countries. In late 1999 I joined one of super-generic project in Dong-A Pharm, my ex-company; I, along with several other colleagues, got to be of the mind that some of the formulations like that could be very competitive globally, after experiencing licensing out of that product. At the similar time it was evident that some of other formulations developed by Korean pharma researchers hit the market, which interested big players like NMCs. I actually at that moment felt we had the expertise and capabilities to compete on the global stage with enhanced or super-generic products. My previous company wasn't working to focus or invest on this opportunity, or leverage their relative strengths, so I decided to leave and start my own business.

What is the strategy that you use to decide which products to target for potential improvement?

We have a lot of people asking us this question. When we consider several appropriate products that we could improve, I don't think that there is really a critical difference between them. The clear strategy for us is to prepare a lifecycle extension in advance of a currently marketed leading product, irrespective of therapeutic area. For example, Pfizer's pregabalin product, Lyrica for neuropathic pain, will go off patent for its main indication in 2017. We are working to prepare a value added product that will only need to be administered once per day instead of twice as with Lyrica, so that we can present a strong challenge to Pfizer when the time comes.

GL PharmTech works with over 60 leading Korean and European pharmaceutical companies; what strategies do you follow in terms of how you structure these partnerships?

There are about 300 local pharmaceutical manufacturers, another 100 international pharma companies, and 300 importers that are working in Korea. With so many players in such a small market, most products are very undifferentiated, and this is a feature of the market that we built our business model upon; many companies have limited experience and capacity to do R&D themselves, and from 2002 to 2008 we focused on doing R&D for new products and developing new production technologies, and then transferring the technology to these other companies.

GL PharmTech developed the G-Soren™ tablet for gastritis, which was expected to sell USD 50 million in 2014. Did the sales live up to expectations in reality?

Not yet supported the respective sales data from licensees and a sales partner, in 2014 our sales might be approximately USD 50 million, I guess; this year, our sales will slightly exceed those of the original product.

What is your plan for the growth and development of GL PharmTech over the next few years?

Before 2008, only companies that had their own manufacturing facility could get product approval from the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety. Players like us, who do not manufacture our own products, were unable to get product approval, even though we did all of the R&D work ourselves; this is why we used the business strategy we did at the time. Since 2008, we have been able to register products with one condition; that we do a clinical study under our name. So, since 2008, there have been only four companies that have been authorized under this system.

Over the coming several years we are going to continuously focus product development by ourselves and try to make a strategic distribution partnership with any eligible player here Korea. As well we will have to find a way to stretch out our business out of Korean territory, which could be just a technology or product license out, or could be any kind of strategic alliance to do a special product development.

Where would you like to see GL PharmTech in five years?

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