

# Interview: Pham Hong Thai - Chief Executive Officer, BioNet - Thailand

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Tags: [vaccines](#), [manufacturing](#), [exports](#), [regulation](#)

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*BioNet's CEO, Pham Hong Thai, shares his thoughts on BioNet's new vaccine that will be launched in the coming year, his belief in Thailand as a research and clinical trials center, and the growth plans for BioNet over the coming years.*

## **What drove you to co-found the company and how has the company's mission changed since it started?**

Initially, my partners and I had the same experience and interest to develop partnership with manufacturers in Asia. Over time, the vaccine market landscape changed with the shortage of essential vaccines in the developing countries, which led many governments to promote vaccine self-reliance. This motivated BioNet to start and bring about a successful business model that sticks true to its roots and maintains its positioning on providing accessible vaccines for all and to save lives.

Over time the organization has moved from developing a consulting-type business for companies wishing to expand their business portfolio, to actually developing new technologies and supplying vaccines globally. Many of our initial business dealings were done in Indonesia, where we work with PT Bio Farma, and since then, we have expanded our services to cover various regions, including South Africa. We are glad that our goal of sharing our vaccine expertise has triggered the interest from more countries interested in building vaccine development and manufacturing capabilities to

supply vaccines for people who need access to medicine around the globe. Our global reach has never been better and we are proud of the organization's transformation since the company's inception.

**What developments has the organization experienced over the last few years?**

Over the last five years we have experienced tremendous growth because we went from a very lean six-person organization when the company was founded to a vaccine developer with more than 120 employees. Moreover, some of our facilities were flooded a few years back due to the heavy rains in Thailand and we went from the brink of giving-up to starting-over and altering the amount of services we provide. We viewed the flooding as an opportunity to change the future of the company and consequently we invested more on new state-of-the-art facilities. We started a research and development center and are now producing vaccines currently in Phase II/III clinical study, among others. We have transformed the image of BioNet in Thailand from an aspiring company with potential, to a true success story and a partner of choice. For example, we are the first organization to bring to Phase I/II clinical study, a vaccine that was completely developed in Thailand. We are pleased to be playing a pioneering role in the vaccine field and to contribute to Thailand's health care and life sciences development.

**What partnerships do you currently have in the pipeline?**

We work with various researchers in Thailand spread across various organizations, and although it can be challenging we would like to partner-up more with both private and public organizations. We collaborated with the Faculty of Science at Mahidol University for the construction of recombinant pertussis strains, as well as recently completed the Phase I/II study of a recombinant vaccine against whooping cough disease with the Center for Tropical Medicines at the same university. We have been collaborating with the university's Center for Vaccine Development on the development of flavivirus vaccines. We are also working with the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) on licensed strains for dengue vaccine development. For the development of our most advanced stage vaccines, we also interact with national authorities such as the Thai Food and Drug Administration (TFDA) and the Department of Medical Sciences (DMSc).

**Where does the company stand today for the commercialization of its newly developed products both in Thailand and internationally?**

We have a few sources of business in various segments. Getting products from our partners and distributing their vaccines throughout our network is one of our main areas of business. We have a

major focus on emerging economies, such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, East Europe as well as Latin America. We propose a broad range of vaccines, either in finished form supplied through a traditional distribution channel, or in bulk form. Such bulk vaccines, which are racks of APIs need to be formulated and filled into finished form. In this case, many of our customers are actually manufacturers themselves. Some of these vaccines are actually produced using the technology transferred by BioNet. For example, our vaccine against Hib meningitis is now available in bulk form or in a combined form called a pentavalent vaccine (for the prevention of five diseases). Such a vaccine is now pre-qualified by the World Health Organization and produced in Indonesia. Other vaccines issued from our own research and using recombinant technology will be launched in a few years.

### **What amount of your business is dedicated to Thailand versus internationally?**

The grand majority of our business is done outside Thailand. As mentioned before, many of our partnerships allow us to work closely in developing markets. This ties into our mission's objective which states that BioNet wants to continue to be the trusted partner of choice for marketing life-saving vaccines in emerging countries. For example, we have several partnerships in India where we are a large supplier of polio vaccine. We are proud to contribute to the global efforts for the eradication of poliomyelitis disease. We also have a collaboration with the Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute of the Thai Red Cross Society to produce rabies vaccines and a few more vaccines in the future.

### **What percentage of your turnover to invest into Research and Development (R&D)?**

In order to become an internationally recognized center of excellence in innovative vaccine R&D, we invest approximately 70 percent of our turnover back into research. We have heavily invested in the last ten years in building new facilities to ensure that we have the highest quality facilities in Thailand for R&D. We believe that this will help in our long-term development of various vaccines. Our organization has ambitious plans to expand the organization's global reach, and in order to do so it is wise to invest the majority of our profits into creating new technologies that do not have us competing with our partners, but instead allow us to create new partnership opportunities with our current and new partners in order to bring innovative vaccines to the market.

### **What keep BioNet grounded in Thailand for the majority of its clinical trials and research?**

BioNet is a unique place where our dynamic team of talented developers who have graduated from universities in Europe, the US, Japan, India and other Asian countries have come together to bring

novel vaccines to life for our customers. Our R&D approach is to exploit the most recent cutting-edge technology platforms available in the field of genetic engineering, protein conjugation, cell-culture and formulation to develop new and affordable vaccines using the most efficient production processes. Thailand is certainly a place to consider for conducting research because of the amount of talented individuals and reputable universities. Moreover, in the field of vaccines, Thailand is internationally recognized for the number and quality of clinical studies. The country has yet to build up the capabilities to translate academic research into actual upstream production but BioNet is hopeful that Thailand will soon create an environment favorable for local companies to achieve self-reliance in vaccine production.

**Please share with our readers the details of the new vaccine you are launching.**

After nearly ten years of development, we are in the stages of launching the world first recombinant pertussis vaccine for booster use, in the coming years. There is nowadays a resurgence of pertussis in many parts of the world which has led to a call for new types of pertussis vaccines. Our proprietary vaccine which we have created from stage one using genetic engineering technology has shown good results in clinical studies and will hopefully bring a solution soon to medical professionals around the globe. This has been a work in progress, but I am proud of the tremendous effort my team has put into our vaccine development. We have already received tremendous interest from companies and organizations in developed, as well as developing markets, and we are working towards proposing our new vaccines to the nations that needs it most first.

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