Interview: Nares Damrongchai – CEO, Thailand Center of Excellence for Life Sciences (TCELS)



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The Thailand Center of Excellence for Life Sciences (TCELS) CEO shares his ambitions to make Thailand a place for innovative business practices, the organization's role in promoting and supporting research and the unique role TCELS plays in creating a regulatory frameworks for the life sciences industry.

What special experiences led you to your current position at the Thailand Center of Excellence for Life Sciences (TCELS)?

After graduating from Tokyo Institute of Technology with a degree in bioengineering. I began working as a scientist where I researched tissue engineering, but after some time I opted to switch careers and began working in policy research, which ultimately led me to my current position at TCELS. Initially when I began working in policy research, Thailand was active in biotechnology and this allowed me to take part in the first biotech policy framework in Thailand, which covers food, biodiversity and the medical and health industry. At the time this new policy framework was groundbreaking because of the influence the work had on policymakers. For example, I was able to speak to the prime minister at the time that advocated for biotechnology in Thailand, as well as educate other policymakers about the positive effects of having a biotechnology framework in Thailand.

What was the logic behind setting up the organization and what is the main role of the organization?

Life sciences has many positive affects on society and Thailand's policymakers saw the potential the nation had to play an active role in life sciences in Southeast Asia. In 2003, Thailand hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and it became apparent that we needed a public organization that works as the focal point of all business, research and investment in the fast growing life sciences industry of Thailand. Consequently, TCELS was initially set up under the Office of the Prime Minister and then became part of the Ministry of Science and Technology and is responsible for the establishment and development of life sciences business in Thailand, the commercialization of life sciences related innovations, services and knowledge, business matching among domestic and international life sciences organizations, life sciences business information and knowledge center, intellectual property protection related consultations and legal services for obtaining patents and technology transfer and obtaining tax exemptions for life sciences companies. The organization is vital to the development of technology creation in Thailand and works as an intermediary platform to exchange ideas with both local companies and international organizations.

What makes TCELS such a vital organization to the development of technology in Thailand?

Simply put: TCELS is an organization that supports various stakeholders and creates a platform for members to communicate. Moreover, the organization works as a consulting firm that connects different players in the industry, including policymakers and regulators, as well as provide a comprehensive database of knowledge and information about the life sciences industry. Over time TCELS has evolved to encompass various sectors in the healthcare and life sciences industry and now has a database of industry players involved in medical devices, herbal medicine, gene and cell therapy, medical robotics and drugs and innovative medical services. Without TCELS it would be a lot harder to communicate and educate oneself about other industry players in Thailand and internationally.

What unique opportunities does Thailand offer to organizations looking to it for opportunities in the healthcare and life sciences industry?

Thailand is at a pivotal turning point in the healthcare and life sciences industry because it is trying to grow and position itself as a place to invest and conduct research. The kingdom has great medical schools, agencies, medical doctors and hospitals, but it should not be compared to

surrounding nations because it is unique in its own way. Currently, the nation's main income generating sectors are tourism, car manufacturing and electronics, but I believe it is also a unique place for the healthcare and life sciences sector to develop. With a population of over 67 million people, Thailand is the 20th most populous country on the planet. More than 70 percent of the population is between the ages of 15-64 years old, making the Thai economy an extremely vibrant and versatile place to do business. Moreover, Thailand has the 2nd largest economy in the ASEAN region and 35th in the world and the life sciences industry in Thailand is growing rapidly. With an increased competitiveness and significant expansion of top-notch medical services, Thailand attracts a large number of medical tourists every year. Moreover, Thailand is centrally located in Southeast Asia, which means it has the potential to reach new levels of excellence within the life sciences industry. For example, I firmly believe that Thailand can we can play a leading role in all phases of clinical trials research because of our diverse population needs and willing patients. We are already well established in phase III trials, but I believe over time this sector will grow, among others.

In order for innovative organizations to set up shop they require funding, what policies are in place to allow organizations to access funding?

Thailand has good public granting agencies, which mainly provide funding to researchers in Thailand. In the past research university researchers were the main receivers of public funds, but more recently the landscape might shift due to the fact that having researchers in Thailand did not necessarily attract investment, which led us to re-shift how granting would be administered on a national level. There is talk of creating a single entity responsible for biomedical and health related research, similar to the United States National Institutes of Health. There are also new laws, which allow the government to create funds in collaboration with private investors. TCELS will continue to be in charge of guiding and supporting, including funding, organizations looking to start innovative life sciences projects. Thailand currently has some antiquated policies in place, but we are heading in the right direction!

How is the organization assisting in promoting innovation in Thailand?

TCELS is assisting in creating standard regulatory policies across the board, which helps promote a systematic way of innovating in Thailand–this is especially apparent in emerging industries. For example, stem cell research is becoming more established in Thailand due to new guidelines we are helping set up with the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and stem cell research agencies. Moreover, we are establishing Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and certified facilities for the production and sale of cell and tissue products for clinical trials. By the end of the year we

will have the only GMP facility of cell products. These products will be sold across the world and TCELS is proud to help develop and shape the infrastructure that will be replicated across the board in the coming years!

Looking forward TCELS also believes that Thailand can branch out in other innovative sectors, such as medical robotics. Currently, we do not have a medical robotics industry, but we have talented groups supported by TCELS and sent to compete in places, such as China and Switzerland and show to the world that Thailand is an innovative place. TCELS has also partnered with King Mongkut's University of Technology Thongburi (KMUTT) to create new medical robotics to increase cells for translplants. I believe that our nation has a lucrative innovative future due to our highly recognized universities, but it is essential to show to our citizens that they should invest in their education and pursue careers in innovation.

What are your ambitions for the organization in the next five years?

We are focused on continuing to create a strong platform where by institutions and organizations can connect and innovate. Thailand is in a transitional phase and we are going to see regulatory changes in the coming years that will allow for more transparent business practices and will create a more welcoming environment for companies to invest. TCELS will continue to play a role in assisting in the creation of policy measures, which promote Thailand as a world-class center for life sciences innovation and investment. Moreover, my goal is to make sure individuals and organizations alike view TCELS as a partner in their development!

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