

Interview: Kris Sterkens - Company Group Chairman, Asia Pacific, Janssen



No matter which market you are in, you are starting to see an evolution of how stakeholders choose to engage with pharmaceutical companies

22.09.2016

Tags: [Pharma](#), [Pharmaceuticals](#), [Janssen](#), [Innovation](#), [Patient-centricity](#), [Singapore](#)

Janssen's company group chairman for Asia Pacific, Kris Sterkens distills the core elements of what it means to be a transformational medical innovator, while exclaiming how this characterization has molded the company's patient-centric commitments across the region.

When several others have experienced drawback, what factors have best positioned Janssen for success in this region?

Succeeding in Asia Pacific entails first coming to terms with the sheer level of diversity that you're dealing with. This region exhibits considerably distinctive dynamics and regulatory frameworks compared to say the convergence of healthcare systems in Europe.

But no matter what market you're in, you're starting to see an evolution of how stakeholders choose to engage with pharmaceutical companies. They don't want to only interact with reps anymore, or at least not all the time, often opting instead for alternative channels including digital platforms. However, you still want to accept the fact that culturally there are differences, while identifying the shared commonalities that we as a regional team can capitalize on. We don't have to reinvent the wheel in each market, as there are some strategies we can execute across all or most of the markets. Ultimately, it's both a science and an art—constantly evaluating where exactly you can achieve commonality and where you should embrace diversity.

And where does a small market like Singapore fit within the bigger picture of Asia Pacific?

The history of Singapore and specifically what's been accomplished in the last 51 years is nothing short of remarkable.

[Featured_in]

For pharmaceutical companies, Singapore is a diverse and highly sophisticated market that is focused on innovation and entrepreneurship, with very well educated people who are quite health conscious, so it's often a test market to pilot new concepts. Of course whatever works in Singapore might not work in other markets; but, there are certainly learnings that can be applied elsewhere.

What would you highlight as some of the primary challenges that pharma companies are facing across emerging markets today?

Access to innovative medicines is perhaps the biggest business challenge that pharma companies face. Many of the governments in this region don't have the budgets to accommodate the substantial premiums associated with some of the newer treatments for cancer, for example. Similarly, within metabolic diseases, the number of diabetic patients in India is 60 million, and that number increases to 150 million when we add China, which is more than the rest of the world combined by far. Governments are well aware of how difficult it is to enable widespread access to medicine for all of these patients, placing more of a moral obligation on the industry to explore different options that will help more patients.

Does it still make sense then to lump all these markets under one umbrella term? Or does the industry need to start redefining the very definition of "emerging markets"?

We can't lump them all together, and we probably learned that the hard way as with any other company. In the past, many companies have tried a one-size-fits-all approach, only to realize that it doesn't work. What is then required today is adapting your strategy to reflect the individual needs of each country and striving for commonalities where it makes sense.

We strive to be a transformational medical innovator, with a relentless focus on five therapeutic areas. However, we fine tune and tailor our approach to the medical needs of each market where we operate. As an example, smoking is an enormous public health issue in China, so we are pursuing specific research in lung cancer to address this urgent need. This already aligns with our core therapeutic focus, but it's an area of specific dedication that might not share the same level of priority in other markets in our region.

[related_story]

The term patient-centricity gets thrown around the industry quite often these days. But it seems Janssen has been among perhaps only a handful of companies that have truly embodied this concept down to its core. For you Kris, what exactly does patient-centricity mean?

When starting this role two years ago, I was surprised to find that patient advocacy is still very much in its infancy here, especially when compared to EMEA. Nevertheless, we are seeing the emergence of more patient views, and as a patient-centric pharmaceutical company, we support the empowerment of patients and their contributions to discussions surrounding reimbursement and access. We also integrate patient preferences and opinions into our clinical trial protocols because we believe that the way patients experience and use our medicines and what they expect from them is very important.

The other element which is unique to this part of the world is the prevalence of self-pay systems and out-of-pocket expenditures, contrasting the universal coverage found in places like Europe. If patients have to pay significant sums to receive a particular medication, they tend to have higher levels of expectation and different needs from what physicians might want or expect. The industry has now come to the point where patients are equals with healthcare practitioners at the forefront of product development, if not more so.

How do you go about measuring performance when it comes to patient-centricity?

It depends on the therapeutic area. As an example, patients with mental illnesses typically end up being worse off when health systems are not built around their needs. They experience high risks of readmission if not properly attended to during and after acute care, and each time patients experience a psychotic episode thereafter, they gradually lose the capacity to function normally. It's clear that models built around patients, with an interwoven network of all stakeholders including hospitals, caregivers, and families, are much more effective in treating mental illnesses and preventing relapses.

When I was based in Germany, we had won a tender to help address a significantly underserved population of psychiatric patients. By building a whole new network system with patients at the heart, which also incorporated the encompassing software and inter-locking relationships, we were able to reduce hospital stays by 30 percent and operating costs by 50 percent. It's now a model that's now being adopted all over a country with one of the most advanced healthcare systems in the world.

Governments in Western Europe have already started moving in that direction, but this is starting to happen here in Asia Pacific as well, with countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia paving the way.

As a company, how will you then go about adapting to these new standards of care?

We want to eventually shift from treatment of diseases to disease interception and even prevention. I'm convinced that 50 years from now, people will look back on 2016 and be surprised at the fact that people seek medical attention only after becoming sick. For example, we do a lot of work on Alzheimer's, a disease that will place tremendous pressures on healthcare systems in the coming years. We had invested substantially into the development of a product that ultimately failed in late phase III. Despite this set back, we identified the prospect of actually intercepting this disease at a much earlier stage.

We want to eventually shift from treatment of diseases to disease interception and even prevention

That's the future we're slowly moving toward, where health and wellness companies such as Johnson and Johnson can work together with insurers to provide truly integrated care—beyond just medicines—and intercepting and ultimately prevent diseases from emerging in the first place. But this can only be achieved if you approach society from the patient point of view.

Looking forward, what aspects of the industry excite you the most?

The sheer impact that you can have with a transformational medicine is simply unparalleled. The life expectancy from 1900 to 2000 went up by 35 years—probably the biggest accomplishment of the 20th century. The fact that people can live longer, healthier, and happier lives because of what we do as an industry together with all surrounding stakeholders—academics, universities, governments—truly excites me.

At the same time, there's still so much more to do. Personally, I have a younger brother with schizophrenia and a father with Alzheimer's and know how such diseases can really cripple people and their families. As an industry, we can be proud of what we have accomplished so far, but we cannot be satisfied.

In Asia Pacific, the speed at which this region is advancing is incredibly invigorating—and that extends beyond just healthcare. The dynamics at play here, the emergence of economies, and level of diversity is like no other. People in this region are eager to develop, to learn, and to

advance; the level of hard work and dedication to succeed that is both simultaneously inspiring and stimulating, and an aspect that Western countries should not underestimate.

What are your personal leadership philosophies on chartering success for company like Janssen?

The difference in productivity between an engaged employee and non-engaged employee is simply astounding, reaching upwards of maybe 300 percent. This can only be achieved by ensuring that your people have a purpose. I've been in so many organizations where people got so caught up in their work, but didn't know how their efforts actually contributed to the overall goals. That's why I start every new role by defining our purpose, making it measurable, and mapping out the journey to get there.

Every year we measure ourselves on whether or not we're on track to deliver our ambitions by 2020. That truly engages people because they understand what they do and how it contributes to the bigger picture. All of our competitors have great products. At the end of the day, however, our people are the ones that truly make the difference.

[See more interviews](#)