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It is essential that we work closer than ever before to preserve and expand access to innovative medicines and vaccines

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MSD's Ashish Pal describes how he led the Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei cluster through a challenging 2020; the importance of leveraging learnings from the past year to create a more resilient, agile, and digitally-focused affiliate; and why increased levels of public-private collaboration in the region are vital to building a sustainable and enabling environment for access to innovative medicines and vaccines.

Ashish, having spoken to you a few years back as the president and MD of MSD for Indonesia, it is great to catch up with you again now as the MD of MSD's Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei cluster, where you have been since April 2018. Could you briefly recap your career journey again for our international audience?

After my education as a pharmacist, I decided to pursue business school as I was interested in a career within the commercial space, in the biopharmaceutical industry, However, before I moved into my first commercial role, I also wanted to gain an understanding of the research and development space, given how pivotal it is, to the sector. I joined a leading specialty pharmaceutical company Alcon, where I started my career in R&D Finance. Shortly followed thereafter, by the opportunity to start and build the global health outcomes function.

I then moved onto my first commercial role in the US market followed by US and global roles of increasing responsibility, to include leading pharmaceutical and surgical device franchises. I then moved to US-based global franchise leadership roles at Organon and Schering Plough, which later became MSD (Merck & Co. Inc., Kenilworth NJ in the US and Canada).

Early in my career at Merck & Co. Inc., Kenilworth, New Jersey in the United States, I expressed a desire to work and live across the emerging markets, which has and continues to be a truly amazing and enriching experience, both professionally and personally.

What have been some of your priorities over the past couple of years, for your cluster?

Currently based out of Singapore, I am the cluster managing director for MSD across Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei.

I also play an active policy leadership role as the President of the Singapore Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (SAPI) and as Vice President for the Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia (PhAMA), the industry associations for global innovative biopharmaceutical companies.

At MSD, our cluster has been on an exciting journey of accelerated transformation and growth characterized by the evolution of our operating model, people transformation and digitalization. Our teams have achieved very significant wins through the years beyond enterprise performance and organizational transformation, to include most recently becoming the biopharmaceutical employer of choice across both Singapore and Malaysia. In Malaysia, one of the more recent recognitions from Clinical Research Malaysia recognized MSD’s contribution to the clinical trials space in Malaysia. Most recently in Singapore, MSD also won recognition for ‘Excellence in Crisis management in recovery’, recognizing our leadership in crisis management, business continuity planning and recovery through the pandemic, all with a prime focus on keeping our amazing colleagues energized and safe.

As an enterprise leader at MSD and in my leadership roles across two industry associations, one of our leading priorities is how can we continue to build greater dialogue with policymakers towards preserving and enhancing access to innovative medicines and vaccines, for patients that need them the most. If anything, this past year has truly highlighted the power of science, innovation, collaboration and partnership across sectors. It is essential that we work closer than ever before to preserve and expand access to innovative medicines and vaccines – and as we know it, the need now could not be greater. With that as context, the role that we play as an industry towards communicating and partnering across sectors and with policymakers, is a critical priority.

A leading priority for me remains the health, safety and mental wellbeing of our colleagues.

This new normal has also inspired and unleashed significantly higher levels of passion, agility, innovation and digitalization while staying true to our purpose as a company. As an industry, I am confident we will continue to reflect and leverage on our learnings through 2020, with a view towards bringing the best of our innovation, to healthcare professionals and their patients.

I am very proud of what our teams have accomplished during these challenging times. Leadership is fundamentally about winning hearts and minds, in that order. Even though we operate as a cluster, we have been able to ensure that our colleagues are connected and energized, through all of the initiatives that we have organized. Working virtually calls for an even greater sense of belonging and the need for a close community that will learn from and watch out for each other. It is important to learn, share and exchange perspectives on emerging best practices across markets regionally and globally. On this note, I believe that my experiences working across global, regional and in-country roles has and continues to be tremendously valuable.

We know that MSD has significant operations in Singapore, which is a regional pharma and healthcare hub. Can you give us an overview of the significance that your cluster holds for regional and global operations?

Singapore is the regional headquarters for MSD in Asia Pacific, spanning over 7,000 MSD colleagues across 12 markets, with about 1,700 based in Singapore, making MSD one of the largest biopharmaceutical employers in Singapore. In addition, one of the remarkable aspects about MSD in Singapore is that all of our operating divisions are present here. We have the human health organization; our Translational Medicine Research Center (TMRC) helping to develop the next generation of innovative medicines, a strategic manufacturing site, our IT hub, which is working on the intersection of technology, healthcare and life science to harness digital innovation and an Aquaculture research institute, a part of our animal health business.

Singapore is, as you said, a key regional pharmaceutical hub. 25 SAPI member companies have their regional offices in Singapore. SAPI member companies employ about 10,000 skilled colleagues creating high quality jobs. The biopharmaceutical sector was recognized as a bright spot through 2020 accounting for 5 percent of the country's GDP and generating about $22 billion in total output.

Malaysia has a rapidly diversifying economy from one that leaned heavily on natural resources like rubber and palm oil, to include biopharmaceuticals, manufacturing, business services and tourism. Malaysia has a mixed healthcare delivery system with public and private players and providers. There are reasonable levels of physician access to healthcare services for the vast majority of the population. Private providers make up around 70 percent of outpatient clinics and 26 percent of acute hospital beds tend to cluster in urban areas.

As an industry association representing innovative biopharmaceutical companies in Malaysia, we as PhAMA see significant potential in bringing more of our innovations to Malaysia, contingent on policy stability and an investment enabling environment. In addition to bringing the best of our innovation, we as an industry have invested significantly in clinical research, by also bringing phase 1 trials to Malaysia. Another bright spot for the healthcare ecosystem in Malaysia is Medical Tourism which is growing at a CAGR of 17 percent and represents a critical component of Malaysia's economy. The third area of growth is in Global Shared Service hubs. Today, ten leading biopharmaceutical companies including MSD, have Global Shared Services support in Malaysia, servicing either the region or the world.

While Malaysia is currently experiencing a COVID-19 surge, we believe that long term policy stability alongside the right investment enabling environment will fuel investment and drive continuing economic growth. The country has a promising combination of a strong and growing healthcare ecosystem, talent and infrastructure. A recent study also highlighted that the healthcare sector is one of the few bright spots in Malaysia and one of the very few sectors, that did not retrench colleagues, during the ongoing pandemic.

Brunei Darussalam has a primarily publicly administered and financed health system, with citizens in Brunei enjoying free access to healthcare.

Working with my colleagues across vastly different countries and the region, is truly energizing. Interacting with policy makers in close collaboration with my colleagues on both association boards alongside regional and global partners, with a view towards retaining and enhancing access to innovation, could not be more meaningful then in these current times.

How do you assess the attractiveness of the Singaporean market to pharma companies like MSD?

Singapore is about a USD 1.2 billion market projected to grow at a CAGR of about six percent through 2030. What has historically made Singapore an attractive market is its ability to recognize and reward biopharmaceutical innovation. We truly applaud Singapore's visionary and progressive leadership alongside the right enabling environment and talent, which have made it a leading biopharmaceutical hub.

Singapore is one of the healthiest countries in the region with one of the most robust healthcare systems in the world and a life expectancy above 82 years. In addition, Singapore has world-class medical professionals, healthcare facilities and access to cutting edge innovation, with medicines and vaccines.

However, at the current time, Singapore spends around 4.8 percent of its GDP on healthcare, significantly below the OECD average of 8.9 percent. Moreover, pharmaceuticals account for about 5.8 percent of total healthcare spending, versus about 16.5 to 17 percent across highly developed markets.

These current trends highlight the need for us at SAPI to work in even closer collaboration with the government, to more effectively communicate the 'value' associated with innovation. Our member companies at SAPI, look forward to continuing to play a critical role, towards engaging in this dialogue. Reflections and learnt lessons through the pandemic, only make the need for this dialogue more critical; how do we as innovative biopharmaceutical companies build on this dialogue and long-standing partnership with the government, to build a sustainable and enabling environment for continuing access to innovative medicines and vaccines.

Our industry plays a critical role in partnering with healthcare professionals to save and improve lives every day. We need to ensure that the conversation focuses on the value, towards enabling sustainable access to innovation.

Core to our mission of saving and improving lives, MSD and several of our biopharmaceutical peer companies also have a significant presence in Singapore to include research and development and manufacturing operations. MSD today has over 1,000 dedicated colleagues at our state-of-the-art manufacturing plant with three of MSD's six global leading products also made in Singapore. Today 8 of the world's ten leading biopharmaceutical companies have manufacturing operations in

Singapore.

Singapore's regulator, the Health Sciences Authority (HSA), is seen as a gold standard regulator for the region. How have MSD's experiences with HSA been – and are there any areas for improvement within Singapore's regulatory and reimbursement landscape?

In our view, the HSA does a terrific job, characterized by high levels of engagement, transparency and dialogue. In terms of regulatory efficiency, i.e., the turnaround times for new drug applications or new indication applications, from our experience, they have generally been even faster than the published timelines. The evaluation times of approximately 270 working days for the full NDA route or 180 working days for an abridged NDA route are also adhered to.

What has been really impressive is that they have maintained this efficiency throughout 2020, despite the pandemic, which is testament to their leadership and operations. As one example, through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, companies have been able to submit real-time data for COVID-19 vaccines while the HSA conducts its regulatory reviews in parallel, a clear reflection of high levels of agility and efficiency.

Looking ahead, what are your expectations for 2021 and beyond?

At MSD, we remain passionate about leveraging on our learnings through 2021; resilient, agile and focused on digitalization. How has and will the operating environment continue to rapidly transform relative to healthcare professionals, patients, policymakers and our partners?

We need to focus forward with a view towards navigating this new normal, while continuing to ensure the physical and mental well-being of our colleagues, as our most critical priority. I am proud of our culture at MSD, which I would characterize as warm, inclusive and performance inspiring.

It is also essential for us to build even higher levels of agility, as a sector; being able to learn, analyze and act thoughtfully but quickly…We need to look well beyond 2021!

Digital acceleration and virtual engagement are critical. COVID-19 has created the impetus to significantly accelerate new ways of working and engagement. We will need growing digital engagement and digital resilience because this new normal inspires a tremendous focus on digital data and analytics, alongside significantly shorter learning cycles, following the collection and assessment of insights.

These times call for an even greater focus on diversity and inclusion. This has been a part of our continuing journey across the cluster, with a focus on colleague development in addition to attracting and retaining talent. We have also recruited talented colleagues from outside of the industry because I believe that this is something that we need now more than ever, in this new normal. This, amongst several other initiatives, is accelerating the evolution of our operating model.

Today, over 50 percent of our leadership team are women, and women represent 45 percent of our workforce. In Malaysia, over half of all external hires over the past 12 months have been women. In addition, across Singapore, we also have amazing colleagues from over 32 different nationalities.

To end the interview, can you share some personal advice or insights with the younger generations about achieving success in the pharma industry?

Assess and recognize the power of purpose. The biopharmaceutical industry is truly purpose-driven; to save and improve lives every day. Passion with purpose is a powerful combination. Add resilience and clarity of direction to passion and purpose. Surround yourself with very diverse colleagues that you can learn from and inspire you.

Don’t be hesitant to step out of your comfort zone; yes, it will be very challenging but you will grow in more ways than you realize. Strive to create and embrace opportunities that will allow you to work outside of your home country; you will learn and appreciate living with and working across cultures, which is a truly invaluable life experience. Build empowered teams, while striving to win hearts and minds, each step of the way!

Purpose, passion, clarity and resilience – are critical but we all need a healthy dose of good luck!

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