Erika Pagani – Country Manager, Pfizer Singapore



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Erika Pagani, country manager for Pfizer Singapore, shares her journey with the company from Brazil to New York, Peru, Ecuador, and finally Singapore. She discusses why the island city-state is well-positioned as a launchpad for Pfizer's innovation and the "laboratory" for emerging Asia, and how the company is working to win the digital race, changing its go-to-market model.

Erika, having decided to take on a new role on the other side of the world in December 2020, can you walk us through your career at Pfizer and the decision to move to Singapore?

I spent 13 years with Pfizer Brazil, starting in business analytics before moving to roles in business development and eventually leadership. Then, in 2018, I moved to New York with my family with a role as Vaccines Regional Lead for Latin America.

In February of 2020, the country manager of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia was promoted to Colombia Country Manager, a much larger market in the region. Following that, the Regional President for Latin America – outlined the need for a six month interim lead for Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia while they found a permanent head. I agreed to take on the role after discussing it with my family. I was travelling between New York where my family was and Peru/Ecuador when COVID-19 came and I spent the rest of my time as a virtual country manager for all three countries.

The initial period was very intense. We were having calls all day and having to make decisions quickly. At the time there was a lot of uncertainty; we heard about the situation in Asia but did not know if the virus was in Latin America already. Our main goals were protecting our colleagues and ensuring that medications would continue reaching patients.

In our industry, shutting down was not an option and we had to find ways to work remotely. Fortunately, Pfizer has always had a work-from-home culture, so everybody more or less knew how to adapt. However, there were inevitably challenges since some of the processes were not 100 percent compatible with working remotely.

During the second phase, we were all working from home and the operations were running smoothly. But we needed to keep going and not have our strategic agenda paralyzed because of the virus.

The third phase came when Pfizer became a central player in COVID-19 vaccine development. None of us expected to have a vaccine approved by the end of 2020. It was unprecedented. I have worked with vaccines in the past and knew that it takes several years to develop them. The breakthrough innovation was amazing to live through.

The next task for us was making our COVID-19 vaccine available to people around the world and engaging with governments; I was fortunate to be the channel with the governments of Peru and Ecuador. That way, what started as a six-month stint became a year-long adventure.

In December I was named as Country Manager for Singapore while I was still in New York, arriving here at the end of January. I was initially apprehensive about taking on a role so far away from home, but this apprehension turned into excitement.

What have been your first impressions of Singapore and its healthcare system during your first months there?

I have been very impressed with the quality of resources, both internally at Pfizer and externally. Singapore has a pro-business environment conducive for investments and a strong talent pool. The Government is highly efficient and plans ahead. It is amazing how they know where they want to be in 5-10 years and are building the foundation to achieve that.

Regarding COVID, the tremendous efforts by the various government agencies in combatting the pandemic on all fronts are highly commendable. In addition, they are thinking about what is next,

with the green economy now a core facet of their strategy, for example.

Both locations have their plus points! I do somewhat miss the relative unpredictability of Latin America, since it makes you resilient and adaptable. You can find new solutions and every day you are doing something different.

Singapore has an internationally recognised healthcare system, designed to ensure that everyone has access to different levels of healthcare. The Health Ministry continuously works to shape care delivery to meet growing healthcare needs and actively promotes preventive health programmes.

The country has a unique and progressive financing system that has supported innovation and stability. Integrated with private insurance, it provides patients with more options and calls for individual accountability, ensuring responsible usage of healthcare resources. As with all other healthcare systems in the world, it must continuously review and evolve to improve access to innovative treatments for all Singaporeans.

Can you explain how Pfizer Singapore is positioned within the global organization and its position in the region?

Singapore is a very relevant and important hub for Pfizer; we have a huge logistical operation here that serves the whole emerging Asia region. We also have an API plant in Singapore and two other unique operations, manufacturing technology development centre and the scientific laboratory services. These two operations are highly specialized and advanced and provide services for Pfizer globally.

The commercial operation of Singapore is small since it is a small country, but we have a very important role in being an innovation hub. Singapore is often the first market for product launches in Emerging Asia, new regulatory strategies to optimize launch timelines, and digital innovations. We act as something of a laboratory for the region.

Is Pfizer’s Singapore portfolio broadly representative of its global portfolio or are there some specific niches and areas of focus that differ?

Our offering in Singapore is very representative of the global portfolio. We have established ourselves as the leading provider of anti-infectives and are the largest hospital supplier of sterile injectable products in the industry. We also have a very robust portfolio in oncology as well as

therapies in rare diseases, vaccines, internal medicine, immunology, and inflammation. They are the same therapeutic areas that we have around the world. In many cases, due to Singapore's regulatory and operational efficiency, some drugs which are not available elsewhere in Asia are available here or are launched here first.

What is on your radar for the next 12 months? Is the focus solely on the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine?

This vaccine is by no means our sole focus. Even though the vaccine is taking up a lot of our time, we have to go beyond. We continually look at ways to preserve and accelerate access to innovative medicines. In 2020, we launched new oncology drugs, but we must admit it has been difficult.

Because of the prevalence of medical tourism, many of the therapies we launched were initially through the private setting with the plan to later expand their availability in the public system. With travel limitations, doctors are not having that same accelerated experience with the new drugs and we are having to manage this.

To date Singapore has administered almost 6 million doses of COVID vaccines. What is your role at this point?

We are supporting the Ministry of Health since they are the drivers of the decisions around the national vaccination program. We work closely with them to ensure the supply of the vaccine doses in the country. The partnership has been very positive, and transparent.

How might the biopharmaceutical industry's response to COVID-19 change public opinion around it?

I am happy that we are changing the perception of the industry among the general public. I hope they now understand the role of the biopharmaceutical industry and the value of innovation in healthcare.

In past crises, the focus was on financial instability, rescuing banks and giving money to people to incentivize consumption or create jobs. However, we never thought about healthcare that way. Our experience in this pandemic has shown us that investing in healthcare is critical because we were

not ready. The question is how to see healthcare, not as an expense but a strategic industry, and healthcare companies like Pfizer as strategic partners. I hope that we will be able to keep that momentum to strengthen public-private partnerships.

Overall, I am very proud of what Pfizer, and other companies, have been doing. Pfizer alone will not solve the pandemic; everyone needs to come together. This commitment could be seen when nine companies, including Pfizer, signed a pledge last year; to continue to make the safety and well-being of vaccinated individuals the top priority in the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

What are your ambitions with Pfizer Singapore?

One of the goals at Pfizer is that we want to win the digital race and change our go-to-market model. Singapore is well-poised to pilot new solutions and lead the conversation, in Asia and more broadly since we are agile and well organized.

Two of our core values are “joy” and “equity.” In equity, there is a Pfizer mindset that everybody has to be listened to, and externally everyone should have access to the best treatment. It is rare to for a company to define joy as a value and yet Pfizer has done so. We spend so much time at work it is important we find joy in what we do.

What advice would you give to younger women looking to replicate your career and track record in the pharmaceutical industry?

First of all, you need to be clear about what you want. You have to understand that you cannot have it all. If your top priority is to be a mother, that is fine. I am a mother of two, but I have not been able to be at all their parent-teacher conferences or pick them up at school every day and interact with other mothers. However, that is OK because I am happy doing my job at Pfizer. Your partner must be supportive of your career. In my case, for several years, I could not leave Brazil because my husband had his own career there and we agreed that it was not the right time to leave. But we also agreed that my career would one day be a priority, so he gave up his career to follow me. It must be a family decision and be good for what you want. Some women want to be the perfect mum, the perfect daughter, the perfect professional, and the perfect friend, but this is impossible! Once we accept this imperfectness, we can truly thrive.

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