Cytiva’s Francis Van Parys Talks Post-Pandemic Localisation, the APAC Talent Crunch, and Cell & Gene Opportunities



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Francis Van Parys, vice president commercial Asia-Pacific at Cytiva, a global life sciences leader dedicated to advancing and accelerating therapeutics, highlights the firm's tireless work to meet the exponential demand for the research, development, and manufacturing of therapies and vaccines against COVID-19. Van Parys also outlines the opportunities and challenges around manufacturing localisation; why partnerships with academia are key for CDMOs to stay abreast of future trends; how Cytiva is supporting biotechs in APAC developing cutting-edge cell and gene therapies; and the crucial importance of the training, acquisition, and retention of talent in the region.

Francis Van Parys, Vice President Commercial APAC, Cytiva from Pharma Boardroom on Vimeo.

Francis, last time we spoke you were with GE Healthcare in Korea, but you are now APAC head for the new entity, Cytiva. Could you begin by explaining in brief what Cytiva is?

Indeed, when we last met the announcement had been made that the GE Healthcare Life Sciences business would be divested to Danaher. We became Cytiva in April 2020; though operating under a new brand, we maintain a heritage of more than 60 years in biopharma. Our mission to advance and accelerate therapeutics hasn't changed. We continue to support the research, development, manufacturing, and delivery of biopharmaceutical therapies. Taking a kitchen as an analogy, we provide the pots, pans, and some of the ingredients that go into the soup; essentially enabling the delivery of biopharmaceuticals for patients around the world.

The past 18 months have seen the entire biopharma industry scrambling to find new solutions and new ways of working to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as therapies and vaccines to counter the disease itself. How has Cytiva adapted and responded in APAC?

Cytiva has been at the centre of the COVID-19 pandemic response, working tirelessly to meet the exponential demand for the research, development, and manufacturing of therapies and vaccines against the disease.

The urgency of demand for both COVID-19 therapeutics and vaccines meant that we needed to accelerate our pre-existing capacity expansion plans by two to three years. We also drew up new plans and accelerated the investment into new builds in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, US, and in the UK to increase capacity. We have recently committed a global investment – together with Pall Corporation – of USD 1.5 billion over two years to meet the growing demand for medicines. This investment follows five strategic acquisitions made in 2021 that will expand our life science platform and global capacity.

Specifically in APAC, we have forged several partnerships and invested in expansion to support and serve the healthcare needs in the region. This included an expansion of our operations in Singapore, where we manufacture some of the raw materials for COVID-19 vaccines and therapies; digitalised and automated our operations such that we are operating round-the-clock; we entered an agreement with the government of Telangana in India to build a 'Fast Trak' centre to accelerate and advance the local biopharma scale up needs. In China, we have expanded our partnership with Wego, a manufacturer of single use components and consumables, which is critical to the manufacture of biopharmaceutical drugs.

Of course, keeping our employees safe and making sure that our plants remain operational have also been crucial over the past 18 months.

Given this huge shift towards COVID-related treatments and vaccines, is there a danger that the industry neglects to invest in other therapeutic areas and health challenges?

Our industry's demands were already growing by double digits pre-COVID, but the pandemic has exponentially added to that. While there was an initial need to prioritise vaccines to fight against COVID-19, we also had to ensure the demands for existing approved therapies as well as ongoing clinical trials were met. This has led us to implement a prioritization mechanism that ensures continuity for patients suffering from life threatening conditions while supporting the manufacturing of COVID-19 therapeutics and vaccines. While we have dealt and managed this challenge, it will continue to be an ongoing challenge even in future. Regardless, the only real solution is manufacturing more products; there is no way around that.

APAC is an enormous and very heterogeneous region, with wildly varying levels of economic development and infrastructure. Can you explain how you roll out a strategy for such a diverse region and outline its importance for Cytiva?

APAC is one of the fastest-growing markets for Cytiva and for the whole biotechnology industry. The region plays a big role in our business, contributing significantly to global growth, and is expected to contribute even more – up to 60 percent – by 2030. I enjoy and find it a privilege to lead the APAC region because of the diversity and uniqueness in each market. A few years back, our focus for the APAC region was on ensuring that access to biologics was made easier and more affordable to patients through the manufacturing of biosimilars. We expect biosimilars will continue to play an important solution to treatment access and affordability, with India, Korea, and China as leading players.

Growth will also be driven by APAC's transformation into a global vaccine hub. With the rapidly increasing innovation levels across the region, we see the industry making its way to achieving this status. Additionally, we are seeing huge progress in the cell and gene therapy space here, which

will also be important.

Historically, most of the infrastructure supporting our industry has been based in the USA and Europe. Therefore, companies like ours have had to develop an ‘in Asia, for Asia’ strategy to support the manufacturing of raw materials and components tailored to the unique needs in the APAC region. We also had to localise other services, investing in scale-ups, process development, and training etc.

China, Japan, Korea, and India are amongst the priority markets within the region and we have developed specific strategies for specific markets accordingly that are very different. We must recognize those differences, adapt, and localise to the needs of governments, pharmaceutical companies, and academic institutions in these countries.

Looking at regionalisation and localisation post-COVID, many governments are looking to keep manufacturing as local as possible to ensure security of supply. However, global companies cannot have advanced manufacturing plants in every country in which they operate, therefore do you see this trend as an opportunity or a challenge?

It is both an opportunity and a challenge as the biopharma sector is one of the world’s most globalised industries. Cytiva’s approach pre-pandemic was to establish strong centres of excellence with concentrations of expertise in engineering, research, development, and manufacturing in the same site serving global markets. This drove productivity as well as better utilisation of resources. This is a model that still holds a lot of validity from a productivity standpoint.

However, governments are shifting their perspectives as they no longer want to be dependent on global supply chains. Companies like Cytiva needs to be strategic as building the same level of infrastructure in every major market around the world would be uneconomical and make access to products difficult and less affordable. Therefore, we must strike a balance, which represents an opportunity to diversify our supply chain and lessen the risk associated with having fewer more concentrated sites.

As an example, a strong part of our legacy is a site in Sweden which manufactures the purification resin used in downstream bioprocessing at high capacity. This is currently the only site globally with such capacity levels; we recently announced a second such site will be built in the US.

In cell culture media, we have major sites in US, Europe, and Singapore, and are reinforcing them by expanding our single-use manufacturing sites into five or six centres so that we can manufacture those consumables closer to where the consumer is. The industry has expressed urgency with which this expansion is needed, so we are working around the clock both to expand capacity at existing sites and invest in new sites for greater diversity.

Unusually for a CDMO, Cytiva partners not just with private industry but with academia as well. How do you work with these stakeholders in APAC and do these interactions differ from those in your home market of the US?

Academia, innovation, research, and development are key to our future. They allow us to keep up to date with the latest technology trends and understand what is happening at the early preclinical stage; the molecules that are being investigated; the therapies that are being developed; and how our current and future technologies can support them.

The pandemic has shown the importance of collaboration and that individual actors cannot solve the health problems of today alone. We believe that our partnerships and collaborations with academia are a good example of what can be done to spur innovation and drive the industry’s R&D ecosystem.

In Asia, our diverse range of partnerships include an academic collaboration around cell and gene therapies in Shanghai, China, to enable new developments and commercialisation of precision medicine in Asia; multiple collaborations with top academic institutions in Korea including Seoul National University to foster talent development in biopharma; and a partnership with the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia to launch a Biologics Innovation Facility that focuses on training, process development, and small scale manufacturing.

In addition to these APAC partnerships, we have struck similar deals in the US with MIT, Harvard, and UPenn among others. Our proactive and proven initiatives have enabled us to fast track our R&D activities, develop those ideas in an accelerated manner, and bring it to market and to patients faster. While science and R&D is important, developing a process for scaled-up manufacturing is equally important and an area where we can play a vital role.

Cell and gene therapy is a highly promising field across the world, including in APAC. In which areas are partners working on cell and gene in your region most in need of Cytiva's support?

Cell and gene therapy is a very dynamic field and one of the most promising areas of scientific and medical innovations, serving smaller patient populations but in a hugely effective way. APAC, and China in particular, is a centre of activity with the highest number of clinical trials globally. At Cytiva we are supporting cell and gene therapy from start to finish, from initial research to final delivery to patients and everything in between.

Due to the infancy of the field, we are centring our focus on supporting early stage biotechs and small biopharma companies with process development and scale-up services. We see ourselves as a company that industrialises cell and gene therapy– meaning we enable the scale-up of their manufacturing and delivery to patients instead of investing in new therapies.

For this reason, we have established 'Fast Trak' centres around the world, including in Shanghai and Korea for APAC, where we work with customers, bring in their technology, get to know their therapies, and work on scale-up models and process improvement with the ultimate goal of bringing the product to patients.

Early-stage biotech is not always preoccupied with the infrastructure needed to ultimately manufacture a product at scale. When they do want to do so, time is of the essence and infrastructure is needed urgently, which is where Cytiva's modular facilities can play a role. This model is not exclusive to cell and gene therapy, but we are increasingly focusing on the area due to its high level of promise.

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What are the major bottlenecks to the further developments of cell and gene therapy in APAC?

The landscape varies market by market. For instance, in the more advanced markets such as China, Korea, and Japan, while regulations and R&D are keeping pace with innovation, to access the right talent is challenging. There is also room for a little more risk taking from a funding perspective. A lot of activity is happening in this space, but not all of it will succeed and we should

be more comfortable with that. Risk is inherent in the cell and gene therapy field. Even though the APAC investment community is more vibrant than before, partly thanks to the pandemic, it is necessary to allow time to come with the right solutions there.

We have attempted to address this funding issue through campaigns such as the 'BioChallenge,' competitions where biotech companies submit proposals to Cytiva which are then evaluated by an independent committee of professionals. The winners get scale-up, consulting, and process development services at our Fast Trak centres

While these challenges need to be overcome, it should be remembered that the field is advancing rapidly and is also the fastest growing part of our business.

The fact that biotechs in APAC are going to require enhanced digital capabilities puts them in direct competition with big tech players for talent. How big a problem is this talent crunch and does Cytiva see itself as having a role to play in bringing solutions for it?

Earlier this year, we released a publication on the resilience of the global biopharma industry for which we interviewed around 2,000 professionals to get their take on the resilience of the industry in their country. The report focused on five key pillars which taken together gives a good picture of the industry's resilience in a particular country: resilience of manufacturing infrastructure, flexibility of the infrastructure, quality of R&D ecosystem, governmental and regulatory landscape, and access to talent.

Where Asia needed to make the biggest improvement was in access to talent, both in economically advanced and developing markets. In Korea, China, and Japan, the cost of talent is increasing very rapidly and there is a shortage of talent pool. However, in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam there is also not enough available talent which is coupled with bottlenecks in academic and training institutions developing the next generation of industry professionals. We see it as an important part of our mission to support the industry. Not only do our Fast Trak centres offer consulting services, process development, and scale up, they also do a significant amount of training in collaboration with governments. As an example, in Guangzhou, China, we run a Bioprocessing Academy in collaboration with the local government and our Fast Trak centre in Korea holds a significant amount of training programs to upskill and train new talents.

Another interesting training collaboration is our global partnership with the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research & Training (NIBRT), a renowned international association based in Ireland which aims to educate the industry about bioprocessing. We are localising our work with NIBRT in APAC as well.

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What would be your final message to our international audience of pharma and biotech executives on behalf of Cytiva?

Cytiva's mission is to advance and accelerate therapeutics; a mission that is always at the forefront of our minds and is why we come to work every day. We are constantly expanding our capabilities to be able to do that from start to finish, 'from idea to vial.' This expansion has been both organic and inorganic; we have made several acquisitions in the last five to six months to increase our capabilities, which we will continue to do, while taking the responsibility to support the biotech community through services, increasing access to talent, and funding.

We are also excited with the progress and breakthroughs brought upon by the pandemic to this industry. While it has been an enormous challenge, it has put a spotlight on our industry and is going to open up new growth and opportunities. We witnessed productive global collaborations involving multiple stakeholders over the last 18 months, and this is one that I hope to see continue, which will ultimately be good news for transforming the health of patients around the world.

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