

Guillermo Frydman – Managing Director, J&J Singapore



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J&J Singapore's Guillermo Frydman outlines how his affiliate negotiated the COVID-19 pandemic; why managing J&J's pharma, medical devices, vision care and consumer businesses together offers unique opportunities to engage as a "broad healthcare company"; and Singapore's role as an innovation hub for the region.

Guillermo, can you begin by outlining your career trajectory and how you came to head up J&J's operations in Singapore?

I have worked for J&J for 27 years, starting out in Argentina and working across various geographies in Latin America. In 2003 the opportunity to move to Singapore for what was meant to be a two-year posting came up. I arrived in Singapore at the end of January 2003 and was managing the infection prevention product line for APAC. Just two months later we were hit by SARS, meaning that COVID-19 is the second pandemic I have faced in in Asia,

I started out as a sales rep before moving into commercial roles. After I left Singapore the first time, I went to Indonesia to launch the "one J&J structure", restructuring Southeast Asia with all sectors under a single country manager. I then launched and managed our Hospital Channel in Indonesia, before returning to Singapore, and then taking my current role in April 2018.

Last year, I took on the additional role of managing medical devices for Southeast Asia and since the end of last year, I have been vice president of the Singapore Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (SAPI). Singapore is a long way from Argentina, but it is where I met my wife, where my son was born, and where I now call home.

What is the significance of Singapore to J&J within the APAC region?

Singapore has a very important role to play as an innovation hub and launchpad for Southeast Asia and APAC. The quality of Singaporean healthcare and physicians allows us to launch new technologies and try new ideas out on a small scale before scaling up in bigger geographies. As an empowered organization focused on executional excellence, Singapore is a great place to be. Through that executional excellence we deliver our passion for the patients, consumers, and customers that we have the privilege to serve.

Talent is also a key component of our strategy and an area where Singapore has a lot to offer in terms of fostering domestic talent, attracting foreign talent to the country. I have really emphasized the importance of exposing Singaporeans to roles and opportunities overseas – enabling them to embrace the opportunities that lie ahead of them.

Because we are a very broad healthcare organization, we have a unique opportunity to leverage our breadth of portfolio and our excellence in stakeholder engagement as a key competitive differentiator. While Singapore is tiny in population size, we offer value in other areas.

Somewhat unusually, you manage J&J's pharma, medical devices, vision care and consumer businesses together. What kind of approach does this necessitate?

We launched this approach in the six countries which form the Southeast Asia cluster in 2014. It has been an amazing journey and gave us a unique opportunity to engage at a different level across a wide variety of stakeholders in the healthcare ecosystem. With this structure we can remove silos, leverage the power of J&J as a broad healthcare company, and live up to expectations that the community has for J&J as a leader in healthcare.

What was the effect of COVID-19 on your operations in 2020?

In spite of COVID-19, most of our product lines performed above expectations, considering the overall circumstances and environment. The pandemic-related restrictions saw a dramatic reduction in elective cases and in medical tourism, but yes, we were able to deliver strong results. This performance was driven by an amazing team who embraces the commitments in Our Credo and strongly resonates with our purpose: blending heart science and ingenuity to profoundly change the trajectory of health for humanity. With that combination and with great teams in place, we were able to navigate the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic posed.

In what was a very atypical year, we had to do things differently, accelerating in areas like digital and virtual engagement. As we serve doctors, nurses and patients, we could not afford to slow down and wait for the pandemic to finish. Therefore, we had to reinvent ourselves, dramatically switching into digital in areas like customer engagement and medical education.

For example, we developed 35 different online, on-demand training modules for surgeons. Additionally, we have launched new medical devices online; something I previously would not have said was possible in areas where touch and feel of the device is very important. We managed to reach around 11,000 healthcare practitioners in Singapore through online engagements; a significant number that would perhaps not have been possible via traditional means.

How did you deal with the many deferred surgeries and procedures in 2020?

Surgeries dropped by between 60 to 70 percent in Southeast Asia last year, depending on the country and the time of year. Elective cases were dramatically affected, while non elective cases, at least in Singapore, continued.

Singapore was probably the first country in Southeast Asia to take a hard stance on COVID-19 restrictions. While, in relative terms, we have continued to perform, it would not be realistic to say that that did not affect us. However, at the end of the day, we have a long-term commitment, not just to Singapore but to every single geography where we operate, hence we doubled up on our commitments in spite of the pandemic situation.

I am proud to say that we have been able to comply with every single regulation put in place. For example, despite Singapore putting very strict restrictions in place to manage the flow of people moving from one hospital to another, our orthopaedic technical staff were able to support 100 percent of requests in a way fully compliant with government regulations.

Hospitals increasingly expect medtech firms not only to provide products but also support their efficiency and clinical outcomes. Which are the areas in most need of improvement within the Singaporean healthcare system?

It is important to mention the strengths of this system and how strong healthcare delivery, affordability and access is in Singapore. One shining light is the MediShield Life insurance scheme which provides protection against large medical bills and expensive outpatient treatments. The framework for this scheme has recently been reviewed to ensure that patients can continue to access the treatments they need.

The shift into value-based healthcare in Singapore is a very positive move. The country is looking at how to make sure that the value equation is properly managed, without affecting the quality of health care delivery and clinical outcomes. This started in 2017 and we are proud of being able to partner with government stakeholders on this journey. For example, J&J was one of the first companies to organise annual seminars connecting thought leaders from Europe, the US, and Singapore to share learnings around value-based healthcare and its implementation. We have also redefined our strategic approach and delivery as J&J to make sure that we were aligned and able to partner with different stakeholders on addressing the "Three Beyonds" strategy.

In terms of potential improvement opportunities, a challenge for Singapore is the increased costs of healthcare. Singaporeans have the third highest life expectancy globally which will increase to 85.4 by 2040, according to a new study published in the medical journal, The Lancet. For example, in oncology, the number of MediShield Life claims for chemotherapy went up by 50 percent between 2017 to 2019, and reimbursement payouts went up 40 percent.

There is a clear need to manage the cost of healthcare while making sure that the quality and the delivery is sustainable. There is an opportunity to intensify public private partnerships, because this is an issue that all Singaporeans have a vested interest in.

There is also an opportunity to increase the dialogue with, and early involvement of, the private sector. This means that both individual companies or associations like SAPI can help address issues and bring forward different perspectives such as innovative funding mechanisms. This is not to say that public private dialogue is not currently taking place, but there is probably an opportunity to increase, intensify or expand that dialogue in certain critical areas such as managing healthcare costs. We, as industry associations or individual companies want to make sure that we play our part for every single Singaporean to access, in a sustainable way, the latest innovations in treatments.

Additionally, COVID-19 made us realize how dependent the private sector in Singapore is on medical tourism, with some private practices seeing a 60 to 70 drop in surgery numbers due to fewer overseas patients. There is therefore also an opportunity in telehealth and telemedicine, areas in which Singapore was an early adopter even pre-COVID-19. This may not be the last pandemic, so the focus now should be on making sure that the impact of future restrictions is less severe.

You mentioned your focus on developing, promoting and exporting talent. What kind of culture do you hope to foster at J&J Singapore and how did you maintain this during 2020?

It was very touching to see the way we got together in 2020, standing up and understanding that we all have a role to play beyond delivering products alone. Early on in the pandemic, a team member suggested putting together care packages and sending them to the hospitals to show our appreciation for frontline healthcare workers. We put together 2000 such packs for workers at the four main restructured hospitals in Singapore, something which really showed our Credo in action. As our CEO has mentioned, we were built for moments like this, and our team stood up very strongly.

In terms of how remote working could affect our culture in the long term, the challenge for leaders is making sure that we are able to constantly read the pulse and stay close to our teams, despite the fact that connecting through a screen can feel a little cold.

I have the privilege to co-lead our "Next norm" workstream, where we are trying to define and shape the future of work arrangements for J&J in Singapore. We know that it might not be 100 percent face to face as before or 100 percent remote as it was in 2020 but are instead imagining what a hybrid model might look like. We are doing a campus wide initiative involving different sectors and actors, for which we have developed different workstreams and experiments to understand what people are looking for and what hybrid model would be best and more suitable to our campus, without compromising on our culture and purpose.

A critical component of this is culture. How do we make sure that our culture and credo remains as strong as it has been for the last 135 years, especially for new employees who may have gone months without meeting their colleagues face to face? It is for us to shape.

What do you see as the role of big multinationals like J&J in supporting local innovation in Singapore?

There are so many examples that I could share on how companies like J&J can play a role in local innovation. I would break down our approach to innovation into three different areas, the first is innovation and collaborations around technology. The second is around human resources, talent, and capability development. The third, which is extremely important for J&J, is our role in the community, beyond tangible innovations that could potentially be commercial solutions.

In terms of technology, myopia is a big issue in Singapore, which half of all children aged five suffer. Moreover, 82 percent of the Singaporean population needs some visual correction.

Three years ago, Paul Stoffels, J&J's Chief Scientific Officer, came to Singapore to sign a collaboration agreement with the National Eye Centre and the Singapore Eye Research Institute on a research to tackle myopia, or nearsighted vision; It is the first public-private partnership of its kind in Asia focused on creating a deeper understanding of how the condition develops, how it progresses and how it may be intercepted. Just this year, we also launched a new myopia management guide with recommendations for eye care professionals to assess, monitor and treat myopia in children.

At the same time, we also work closely with institutions like A*Star and the National Health Group to make sure that we advance innovation around technologies in areas like type two diabetes, 3D printing, and all the systems and processes that can improve workflows in the operating room.

From the HR capacity and capability development perspective, the Singaporean government launched an initiative last year called "SG United", aiming to ensure that people with a tertiary level of education are inserted into the work force. As part of this program, we were able to hire 30 trainees, some of whom are already full-time J&J employees, while some were able to find jobs elsewhere. We are very proud of playing a role in talent development, a key component of Singapore's national agenda. Additionally, we have been accredited by the Singapore Pharmacy Council to provide work experience for pharmacists. Trainee pharmacists from the NUS School of Pharmacy spend 12 weeks with us to gain an understanding of a different perspective of the pharmaceutical industry. Over 100 of the participants in this program are now licensed pharmacists.

The third component is in communities, which I am extremely passionate about. I am very proud of the innovation and partnerships that we have been able to drive around mental health, a major concern of the Singaporean government as well. We are working on two social impact bonds (or SIB) in Singapore focused on mental health, that we hope to launch in 2021. Through SIB, which is a form of impact investment, we are confident that we can accelerate our impact to our communities. There are many things that we've done around schizophrenia as well. We are also proud to mention that J&J is proud to be the sole private company recipient of the ASEAN red ribbon for outstanding workplace because of the inclusive environment that we were able to create for people living with HIV/AIDS.

This is a testament to J&J's commitment to change the trajectory of health, in collaboration with like-minded partners.

What are your goals and priorities in the medium term?

This is a very timely question as we emerge from the pandemic and start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. J&J will continue to play a leading role in cementing Singapore's position on the global innovation map. Singapore has many capabilities around innovation to leverage and can be extremely competitive. We will also continue to play a critical role in partnering with different agencies and stakeholders in the Singapore healthcare ecosystem to make sure that, together, we

advance healthcare delivery.

Patients are waiting, and this is something that we take very seriously. As long as sick patients face challenges in accessing or affording the best treatment, then there is a job to be done. It is my commitment to Singapore to make sure that I do my part, and that we do our part at J&J to ensure that every Singaporean has access to those innovations in healthcare.

From a talent point of view, I want J&J Singapore to be the best company to work for and make sure that the employee experience is uniquely positive. Post-COVID, we are constantly thinking about which changes to keep and how to reinvent ourselves to be even more relevant for patients, employees, communities, and stakeholders. There are many learnings on every front from the situation we went through last year. We must make sure that we embrace and remember them; we do not want to waste a good crisis

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