

Interview: Claus Zieler – Senior Vice President and Head of Commercial Operations Asia Pacific, Bayer Pharmaceuticals Division, Singapore



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Claus Zieler discusses the Asia Pacific region’s importance to Bayer’s global operations, the company’s commitment to increasing its portfolio of innovative medicines, and the potential for innovation coming from Asian markets.

Having spent four years in Japan previously, how have you had to adapt to serving the entire Asia Pacific region?

Japan, as a single market, has its own culture and its unique ways of working which do not transpose to other countries; certainly not to Asia Pacific which is a heterogeneous region itself, made up of many different markets. These markets are different in terms of cultures, languages, religions and the way healthcare is being managed. Take healthcare systems for example, we have markets such as Australia, Japan, Korea and Taiwan where medicines are reimbursed, and we have also markets like India or the Philippines where there is no government system to support the reimbursement of medicines. This is an example of just how different things can be among countries in Asia Pacific. We tailor our business strategies to the needs of every market as there is no one-size-fit-all strategy for this diverse region.

How significant is a region like Asia Pacific to Bayer Pharmaceuticals Division's overall global strategy?

Asia Pacific contributes more than 25% of our global pharmaceuticals sales, which is a significant portion: in 2016, we reported a sales increase of 8.6% to more than €4.8 billion for our Pharmaceuticals Division in the region. Our Pharmaceuticals business here is also one of the fastest growing among multinational companies and we are among the top 10 in value sales, according to global health intelligence agency IMS 2016 data.

The region will continue to provide a viable growth opportunity, as IMS predicts an average market growth rate of 5% across the region from 2017 to 2020. There are many drivers behind this strong growth rate. Today, 12% of the region's population is older than 60. In 2050, this percentage will double to 24%. We know that when one reaches 60-65 years of age, his/her healthcare needs such as hospital care, home care and medication needs increase exponentially. At the same time, a rapidly growing population and a growing middle class in different countries are also driving the healthcare needs in our region.

As Head of the Region, what objectives are you currently focusing on to ensure a sustainable growth in the long-term?

We will continue to grow our portfolio of innovative medicines. We launched a number of highly innovative products – two of which are our main growth drivers – our oral anticoagulant medicine Xarelto and Anti-VEGF eye injection Eylea. We saw strong uptake of Xarelto and Eylea since launch because they address the growing trends of difficult-to-treat medical conditions like stroke, thrombosis and eye diseases that are related to aging and diabetes.

Xarelto prevents stroke associated with a heart condition called Atrial Fibrillation (AF). AF, characterized by irregular heartbeats, which increases the risk of stroke caused by blood clots by five-fold. Strokes due to AF are more severe, causing disability in over 50% of patients and generally worse outcomes than strokes due to other causes. Xarelto can help prevent an AF stroke without the limitations of traditional warfarin therapy, which include many food and drug interactions, regular blood monitoring requirements and risk of intracranial (skull) bleeding.

Last year, Bayer announced results of its first Pan-Asian real world study (XANAP) which reaffirmed the low stroke and bleeding rates of Xarelto for AF stroke prevention. This finding is significant as it is projected that the region will have approximately 72 million AF patients in 2050, representing an important medical need.

Eylea, the Anti-VEGF eye injection has been globally approved for the treatment of several retinal disorders in five distinct indications including an age-related eye disease called wet age-related macular degeneration (wAMD). wAMD is a chronic and degenerative eye disease that leads to progressive vision loss. Eylea is a specifically designed molecule which blocks key growth factors to combat these conditions, restoring and maintaining vision to enable patients to participate in everyday activities.

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Bayer announced primary results of the PLANET study last year, which demonstrated the effectiveness of Eylea monotherapy in polypoidal choroidal vasculopathy (PCV), a subtype of wAMD highly prevalent in Asians. This finding is important for patients as it is projected that approximately 17 million people in Asia Pacific will suffer from wAMD, a leading cause of blindness, by 2040.

Both Xarelto and Eylea will continue to serve the growing healthcare needs of the aging population in the region.

Are you focusing on building on these two products or on launching new products in the region?

Right now, we will build on those two innovative products. They have driven our growth in the past few years and will continue to do so.

Globally, we are also working on our pipeline which is well-stocked with more than 50 development projects. Among these projects, six of them are in the mid- to late-stage pipeline will have potential to treat various types of cancers, diabetic kidney disease, worsening chronic heart failure and uterine fibroids, which are also prevalent in the Asia Pacific population.

Bayer has several innovation centers around the world, with three of them are located in Asia. What does this say about the value that Bayer sees in Asian markets as an original source for innovation which will also benefit patients in the Western countries?

The healthcare challenges in the world cannot be solved by one single company. At Bayer, we believe in bringing the best minds together to develop new and better solutions to serve the unmet medical needs of patients. Through our Innovation Centers around the world, three of them in Asia (Singapore, Beijing, and Osaka), we connect with the innovation that takes place in Asia and across the world.

Many countries in Asia, e.g. Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, offer conducive environments for driving innovation supported by government policies, strong infrastructures and skilled talent pools. We see great value in establishing our research collaborations in these countries. For example, in Singapore we have developed a series of networks with academic institutions. Some of these have conducted first-in-man studies, which used to be only done in Europe, but we have now brought them to Asia. We have conducted six first-in-man studies in the region. Our collaborative partnerships with academia have produced significant outcomes, particularly in gastric and liver cancers, which are leading causes of cancer death in Asia and among the top killers in Singapore in particular.

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Through exchanges with our network of excellent research partners in the region, we also gain an understanding of the burden of diseases in Asia. For example, we are working with the National University Health System (NUHS) in Singapore on the ASIAN-HF (Asian Sudden Cardiac Death in Heart Failure) study whereby prospective data regarding demographics, risk factors, and outcomes of approx. 8,000 Asian patients under treatment for heart failure (HF) are collected. The ASIAN-HF registry advances the understanding of the burden and predictors of death and hospitalization among these patients. The knowledge gained will help us in the planning of strategies to better address the unmet and growing clinical needs of patients with cardiovascular disease in Asia.

What is your view about Singapore being a "gateway to Asia"? Does Asia really need a gateway?

Singapore is an excellent hub to support the expansion of our innovation activities in Asia Pacific. There is a conducive environment for driving medical innovation in Singapore. Research is well supported by the government and labs and hospitals are well equipped. The scientific community has a lot of expertise and attracts renowned scientists from around the world.

Singapore's diverse population also makes it a good location to study diseases across different ethnicities, including Chinese, Indian, and Malays, which cover a large part of the population within Asia. We also see increasing interest from the government and academic institutions to promote industry collaboration with funding from the government through grant programmes and support from the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) to facilitate such collaborations.

Home to over half of the world's population, this region has long served as an opportunistic source of growth for the industry. But if you look at the portion of patients who actually have the ability and means to access medicines, that massive potential suddenly becomes much less clear-cut. When it comes to introducing more innovations into healthcare systems across Asia Pacific, how can pharma companies effectively tip the scale in their favor?

Our society is facing a tremendous healthcare challenge and the question is how we help patients who today do not have treatments for certain diseases. The answer to this is innovation – developing products to help address the unmet medical needs of these patients. How do we put a value on innovation? Now what we are seeing is very encouraging, 2 out of 3 cancer patients live at least five years after diagnosis as a result of innovative medicines. Innovative medicines help patients live longer, healthier and more productive lives. Society benefits from health and wellness of individuals who are then able to contribute by being productive members of the community. For this to continue, government, industry, and payers – all parties together contribute to making innovation accessible to patients.

You have been working for Bayer for over 25 years. What factors have motivated you to stay here?

Making a difference in the lives of patients is what keeps me energized. What I like most about my role is that I get to work and connect with like-minded people – people who are committed, passionate about innovation and determined to make a difference to patients' lives.

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