

Interview: Lawrence Wong – General Manager, Ferring Pharmaceuticals, Hong Kong



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Lawrence Wong, general manager of Ferring Pharmaceuticals in Hong Kong, discusses the important role of the Hong Kong affiliate in support of regional operations, the value of the Hong Kong market given that Ferring offers most of its global portfolio here, and how the company philosophy “People come first at Ferring” is manifested locally.

Asia-Pacific (APAC) is a very important region for Hong Kong and a new regional HQ was opened in Singapore in 2016 to support growth here, with nearly USD 9 million committed in R&D and supply chain operations. What role does Hong Kong play in the region?

Ferring has had a long history in Hong Kong since its incorporation in 1987. Throughout the years, Ferring Hong Kong has played a significant role in supporting corporate strategies on business development across Asia Pacific. The recent relocation of regional operations to Singapore enables the company here to serve as a pilot for the implementation of new concepts on business operations as well as collaboration with healthcare stakeholders, with intense focus on its unique domestic market in the city.

What are the particular characteristics of the Hong Kong pharma market?

Our healthcare system has concrete fundamentals while evolving to cope with the changing and increasing needs from the local market. Generally, the system consists of a public sector that takes a cost-effective approach to care for most people with emergency and chronic medical needs at a very professional standard; and a private sector that provides quality medical service to patients at their own expenses. In such a context, the pharma industry plays an important role among patients and

healthcare professionals in both the public and private sectors to order to catalyze the overall advancement of Hong Kong's healthcare system, by not only supplying the latest medicines or healthcare products but also facilitating the expertise and knowhow exchange for total patient management.

As Ferring is a company serving people with specialty medicine under the corporate philosophy "People come first at Ferring", the business ecology in Hong Kong is well-suited for our business development here.

Globally, Ferring has product offerings in a number of therapeutic areas. How is the Ferring portfolio represented in Hong Kong?

Due to the historical development of Ferring in Hong Kong, we are fortunate to be able to have the majority of Ferring products marketed in the city, covering the therapeutic areas of Fertility, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Urology, Gastroenterology and Orthopedic Surgery. This comprehensiveness makes Ferring Hong Kong a rather prominent entity within the region. The regulatory environment in Hong Kong also favors our competitive advantage.

As a medium-sized pharma company, we emphasize a niche positioning in the marketplace amongst the various pharma giants present here. We aim to provide practical solutions for rare or less common diseases. For instance, in Gastroenterology, we work intensely to provide medicines controlling Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), an autoimmune disorder in which patients' guts become inflamed.

In Female Healthcare, we aim to support healthcare professionals to deliver personalized treatment to couples having the medical need for conception, a specific therapeutic area that Ferring Hong Kong has been committed to for more than two decades. The ultimate goal is to turn patients into parents. Also, we expect to launch a new medicine reducing the number of urinary voiding episodes soon, which will help improve the sleep and life quality of the aging population.

[Featured_in]

In a 7.2 million population market, we have to look more to the way of doing business to differentiate ourselves as opposed to patient population size. With reference to some European markets of relative sizes, reliable performance is continuously delivered, meaning that the value we generated to the markets here is reflected and rewarded. More than monetary figures, patients' health is our priority through the collaborative works with healthcare professionals.

We are also eager to support healthcare professionals to understand the clinical findings and science in our areas. As such, we facilitate exchanges of clinical experience and expertise in the medical community worldwide.

With this holistic focus on the promotion of better health outcomes, how is the Ferring brand perceived in Hong Kong?

Fortunately, we are viewed very positively as a brand. Nevertheless, I believe we are on an endless road to reach better excellence in terms of supplying our products and supporting medical community, in particular to our patients. The increasing social attention on how pharma companies interact with healthcare professionals and patients encourages ever higher standards and compliance with business ethics. We believe this is a positive sign reflecting that the general public is paying more attention to and emphasis on health and related issues. Public awareness programs are therefore considered effective for elevating their knowledge.

In addition, we always aim to be a socially responsible company and therefore have a strong intention of engaging with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Ferring Hong Kong has been recognized as a "Caring Company" by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service through its volunteering contributions to non-profit organizations supporting underprivileged children.

With such diverse and dynamic operations here, how do you motivate your staff to work to the best of their abilities?

We are motivated because we align personal development with business growth, through three main perspectives.

The first is learning by doing. We adopt a pragmatic approach encouraging our sales and marketing colleagues to acquire field experience through continuous interactions with healthcare providers in order to understand the needs and dynamics of the market. Certainly, on-the-job mentorship and coaching are crucial elements we provide.

Secondly, we do active matching for individual colleagues with training courses provided by various institutes in Hong Kong in order to develop the competences required in their job capacities. Their participations are comprehensively supported by Ferring.

Finally, we have internal talent development programs initiated by the APAC regional office. This program enables potential colleagues to develop their competences and careers through job rotation and relocations across the region or even worldwide. This certainly allows our colleagues to gain new insights into the operations of pharma industry and to broaden their horizons.

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From a broader perspective, Ferring is headquartered in Switzerland. Both Switzerland and Hong Kong are small, highly innovative countries with highly sophisticated healthcare systems. What lessons can the Hong Kong affiliate learn from the Swiss HQ?

Many inherent advantages support the headquartering of international pharma companies, including Ferring, in the Switzerland. It may be irrelevant to compare directly the difference in nature, I could share what we could and should learn from our cohorts in our Global Headquarters in the Switzerland and our APAC regional office in Singapore, in two particular areas.

Firstly, we could have higher exposure in the industry through the active participation and support in various activities or projects coordinated by Hong Kong Association of Pharmaceutical Industry (HKAPI), the official organization representing the industry. This would facilitate communication among pharma companies and our collective opinions could be effectively brought to stakeholders, especially within the government, relating to healthcare advancement policymaking and planning.

When it comes people, we are inspired by and have learnt from the talent development programs in our Headquarters. It is systematic and comprehensive, with an international scope of vision supporting the development of high potential candidates through various on-the-job rotations. It also counts as one of good practical illustrations of our philosophy, "People come first at Ferring".

What are your priorities for Ferring Hong Kong in the next five years?

I focus on two imperatives as priority. Firstly, it is people. Staff development is always our priority, not only in terms of how we can develop our people's competence and confidence but also their commitment and passion to healthcare industry at large. I have personally been lucky to come across numerous opportunities to advance and I feel very optimistic about this industry. Now that I

am in an executive position, it is important for me to create more opportunities to others and also support the industry's flourishing. Furthermore, we encourage our colleagues to pursue any possible collaborations with healthcare professionals. With the international connectivity of Hong Kong, their collaborative works on medical science would benefit people not only in Hong Kong, but also regionally in Greater China and across Asia-Pacific.

The second priority pertains to our products. Continuously, we work closely with our regional and global colleagues for the introduction of new products in Hong Kong. It is of high importance that through our efforts, we bring in some new products whose clinical benefits have been well proven in other countries in Europe and the U.S., and eventually cater to various medical needs especially in Urology, Fertility and Gastroenterology. We would like to maintain our commitment and momentum when it comes to supporting ever-better healthcare for the people in Hong Kong.

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