

Interview: Raphael Ho – General Manager, Amgen Singapore & Malaysia

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With Amgen having recently reacquired the sales rights to three of its drugs, the company's GM in Singapore and Malaysia, Raphael Ho, explains the rationale behind Amgen's recent entry in Singapore and his experience in setting up the affiliate, while also expounding upon the unique value of Amgen products in addressing unmet medical needs.

As an introduction for our readers, could you please provide some insight into Amgen's presence within Singapore?

We established the commercial affiliate in Singapore in December 2015. In line with that, Amgen has also just recently reacquired the rights to three of Amgen's innovative medicines – XGEVA[®], Prolia[®], Vectibix[®] – from GSK in 48 markets around the globe, including Singapore.

These medicines have had a tremendous benefit to patients in both Singapore and Malaysia with osteoporosis, bone metastases and colorectal cancer. With this new affiliate, we're excited to continue building upon these efforts, while also introducing more innovations from our pipeline into the market.

And of course, our business development plan is aligned with our recently established Next-Generation Biomanufacturing facility in Singapore, which will manufacture some of the products that we'll be commercializing here.

How will Amgen go about maintaining and enhancing the value proposition of these three products in Singapore?

It's all about carrying on the good work that GSK has done, while bringing the Amgen expertise into the market, especially as the originators of the products. For example, this November, we will be partnering with Singapore's Osteoporosis Society and participating in the regional International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) meeting. This will be Amgen's first time participating in a major osteoporosis forum in the region, and we very much look forward to raising the standards of care for the management and treatment of this debilitating disease.

How has the process been of setting the new commercial entity?

It has been quite a journey since everything had to be set up from scratch, including the legal and regulatory framework, team resourcing, and so on. The current trends in Asia Pacific are creating unique opportunities for pharmaceutical companies, particularly in line with the region's expanding middle class and increasingly proactive focus on personal health and disease awareness.

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The timing of our entry into the Singaporean market is seamlessly aligned with these trends. We are concurrently taking back and launching products at the same time, while establishing the necessary capabilities and processes to scale up our commercial presence.

The majority of MNCs have had already some sort of presence in Singapore, why has Amgen only recently decided to establish an official office here?

. Amgen, today one of the world's leading biotechnology companies, was founded just 36 years ago, so we are a much younger company than most of the multi-national pharmaceutical companies. While some of our medicines have been available in Asia through partner companies for a number of years, Amgen just established its Japan Asia Pacific Region in 2012 – the same year we opened an affiliate in Mainland China – and we've been focusing since then on expansion in this region. We launched a joint venture with Astellas in Japan in 2013, and in the past year, we've opened new affiliates in Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand, plus established agreements with distributors in five additional Asian markets.

We have always delivered high quality medicines that target the most challenging, unmet needs in the market, and have now gotten to the point where we can provide more tailored solutions and targeted services – especially given the pipeline that's coming through – with our own commercial office, than if we were to continue operating through a partner.

What is the strategic rationale behind consolidating both the Singapore and Malaysia operations under your watch?

I have strong professional expertise in both markets so I really understand the particularities of each market. In terms of geography, Singapore and Malaysia share the same time zone and are within an hour flight from each other. They are also quite similar both culturally and from a healthcare point of view, prompting many companies to pursue a similar operating structure.

While we still operate through a distributor in Malaysia for various reasons, Singapore offers a myriad of qualities that make it a very attractive location to establish a commercial office. It is well known that the business environment in Singapore is quite friendly and there is a long-standing trend of companies basing regional offices here. This is boosted by Singapore's strong infrastructure, high quality of talent and strategic location, which all make it an ideal destination to run a business in Asia.

What would you pinpoint as the key opportunities in Singapore's healthcare market?

Singapore is a thought leader in several areas, particularly from a regulatory point of view where the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) aims to be as structured and robust as its Western counterparts. For example, patients here get access to innovative medicines fairly quickly, shortly following approvals from the FDA or EMA.

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The market landscape is quite open, populated with very well informed physicians that are familiar with the latest therapies, perhaps only usurped by their willingness to collaborate with industry and explore innovation. Additionally, the government's overarching mandate to drive science and innovation are in line with Amgen's own aspirations to bring more innovation.

What would you highlight as the biggest challenges that Singapore's healthcare system will be facing in the coming years?

In comparison to the majority of developed markets that are based on a reimbursement system, Singapore's healthcare scheme is self-paid. This creates a unique challenge for pharmaceutical companies and decision-makers alike to create a safety net for those patients that don't possess the necessary means to freely access innovative medicines which are already relatively low-cost without moving towards a fully reimbursement-based framework.

Amgen has placed its stated mission "to serve patients" at the heart of every single decision we make. We've dedicated all of our time and resources to ethically deliver unprecedented medical innovations that truly impact patient needs, and not just provide marginal benefits. It is then about collaborating with various stakeholders to formulate the most pragmatic pathways to introduce these innovations into the system.

How would you assess the evolution of Singapore's biomedical landscape in line with global trends?

The field is definitely getting more crowded, and we're increasingly seeing more highly focused biotechnology companies like Amgen, as opposed to traditional multinational pharmaceutical players. This trend effectively follows the research direction of developing more personalized biotherapies targeting each respective disease without compromising safety or efficacy.

Decision-makers around the world must now take into consideration that there are evolving needs according to different demographics. For instance, according to the Ministry of Health (MOH) Singapore and other countries list cancer as their top cause of death prompting almost all companies to enlarge their oncology portfolio. The influx of more chronic diseases is directly in line with the region's lifestyle changes and aging population. The whole industry has to evolve alongside these trends in how it delivers medicines to patients in the most cost-effective way, while addressing their specific needs.

What is your future outlook on the prospective value that Singapore will serve within Amgen's global network?

It is extremely bright. Having just recently established our Next-Gen Biomanufacturing facility the only one of its kind globally in Singapore, with a second one soon to open up, I am very excited about what the future holds. And this excitement doesn't only extend to our innovation in manufacturing, but also the potential innovation in commercial models that we plan on applying in Singapore and across the region.

Having just spent a decade working for GSK, how was the transition to a company like Amgen?

I've been very impressed by Amgen's targeted focus on R&D and unwavering commitment to bring innovation both across a range of disease states as well as into the market.

For manufacturing, our Next-Generation technology has significantly advanced all facets of biomanufacturing in our industry, particularly in terms of cost-efficiency and environmental impact.

For medicines, we've been known to take on some of the toughest cancers and other diseases; our priority focus is on delivering innovative medicines to treat serious illnesses and unmet medical needs.

Amgen has always opted for the road less travelled, never shying away from the steepest challenges. And the essence of this mentality has never wavered over the course of Amgen's 36 year history.

As a first-time general manager, how did you react to the opportunity to lead the commercial affiliate?

Having been born and bred in Singapore, I am very proud to be given the opportunity to serve the interests of my people and have a direct hand in improving patients' lives.

Leaders in the healthcare industry have the social responsibility of not only conducting business in the market, but also doing so in a sustainable manner that ultimately serves to benefit the people—whether that's through corporate social responsibility or ensuring the widespread access to life-saving treatments.

Statistically speaking, I will most likely directly or indirectly encounter someone close to me with osteoporosis at some point in my life. As such, I have a personally vested interest in bringing the effective treatment and recognition of this disease to the forefront of medical education.

Looking forward, what is your three-year action plan for Amgen in Singapore?

One of my primary priorities is to elevate Amgen's corporate brand, ensuring that our stakeholders truly understand what our mission is, what we stand for, and the type of innovation that we bring to the market. I am fully conscious that it is a long journey, but I strongly believe that our products will back up our performance in Singapore and in the region.

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