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Sumalee Kristarnin, country president of Novartis Thailand, shares the main initiatives of the affiliate in Thailand to take care of people, employees and patients. She highlights how the key priorities, put in place at the global level, are reflected in the local business, and how Novartis is trying to introduce as many innovative products as possible and ensure that Thai patients can access them.

Why did you decide to pursue a career in the pharmaceutical industry?

My entire young life I was asking myself what I would do in the future. It was important for me to know exactly what I wanted to do. During my journey, I decided to pursue pharmacy studies at Mahidol University, which allowed me to know more about medicine and help patients. I went to the United States to finish my studies and started my career at MSD. Eventually, I decided to come back to Thailand, which was right after the tsunami. I was truly convinced that I wanted to do more for my home country so started to work at Novartis Thailand in 2013.

In 2018, Novartis achieved global revenues of more than USD 51 billion, and a significant part of that came from emerging markets. What is the significance of the Thai Affiliate for Novartis?

Regarding the Thai economy, Thailand is ranked number two among ASEAN countries and ranked number 27 globally in terms of ease of doing business. Obviously, we have policies in place, and the government concentrates its efforts on establishing a positive business environment. Thailand is becoming more popular and a hub for medical tourism thanks to its quality of care and high level of expertise. We have many physicians graduated from the best universities and leading medical schools around the globe. Their expertise combined with the relative low cost of care makes Thailand an attractive place.

One of the main challenges in Thailand is the ageing population. Currently, 20 percent of our population is over 60 years old. In 30 years, this will be over 30 percent. We have to be proactive and look at new ways of treatment.

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Thailand is one of the few countries with universal healthcare in the region. How successful have you been in getting life-changing products covered by the universal health coverage scheme?

The main universal health coverage scheme covers more than 80 percent of the population, but it is quite challenging. When we launch new products, they are not part of universal healthcare coverage. We have been working closely with the government in order to expand patient access to our products. I truly believe that it is important that the entire Thai population have access to a good quality of care. We already have a few drugs listed on the National Drug List (NDL) – for example Nilotinib. We are working hard to get additional medication on the NDL at a fair price to make sure that the Thai patient has access.

Novartis holds a mixed portfolio globally from oncology and immunology to cardio-metabolics, neuroscience and ophthalmology. Which products of the global portfolio are the most in-demand in Thailand? How do you ensure that the Thai patient has access to your products?

As one of the leading multinational companies, we are working to be the partner who brings a sustainable solution to the Thai patients, from clinical trials and diagnostics to improving the quality of care and expanding access. Novartis has over 70 clinical trials currently underway in Thailand. From the physician's perspective, they have the chance to be involved in the development of innovative medicines.

Novartis Thailand has launched new products in various areas such as heart failure, metastatic breast cancer, and skin cancer. When we launch a new product, we are focusing on the patient and how he/she could get the best treatment possible from us. Our mission is to improve lives, especially in such a challenging environment with an ageing population increasing prevalence of cancer and heart failure.

Novartis stands as a pioneer in the development of cell and gene therapies like CAR-T. Although there are reimbursement issues due to the high price tag even in developed European markets, how do you see the potential of seeing these innovative oncology treatments in Thailand one day?

Cancer treatment has developed over time from chemotherapy, which is quite traditional and relatively non-specific with many side effects, to targeted therapy, and now even cell and gene therapy like CAR-T. Novartis is really working on innovation. It is one of our core values and mission for the patient. We want to enable patient access to medicines like cell and gene therapies through innovative policy solutions and close collaboration between companies, authorities and specialist healthcare providers.

Even before going into those therapies in Thailand, we have to make sure that the foundations are in place. We are committed to working on getting ready in terms of infrastructure and expertise. Once everything is in place, we will ensure the availability of those therapies and medicines for Thai patients.

Novartis is one of the leading pharmaceutical companies in the world. What is your positioning right now in Thailand and how do you want to strengthen the positioning of Novartis Thailand?

Our CEO, Dr Vas Narasimhan, talked earlier this year about the five key priorities for the entire Novartis organization. In Thailand, we are focusing on the same priorities. First of all, we are talking about earning and gaining trust in society. We aim to create strong partnerships with societal stakeholders. We are talking to these stakeholders in various meetings to discuss Thailand's main challenges in Healthcare and how Novartis, as a leading pharmaceutical company, can help and make sure that we can treat more patients. We are really proud of the role that we are playing and how we are helping to improve the healthcare ecosystem in the country. We also have to work on digital, data and other innovations.

Finally, something which is in our DNA is that we focus on people. The patient is always at the back of our minds, and we ensure that the patient is in the centre of our business. However, by people, we also mean the people who are working with us. We want to make sure that we help them to achieve their full potential. At Novartis Thailand, we have almost 600 employees and we are making sure that all of them are following what we call the "cultural transformation," which means to be curious, be inspired, and be "un-bossed."

We are talking a lot about leadership with the team, managers and associates, asking ourselves a lot of questions to get inspired. The concept of "un-boss" is probably the most challenging. Employees at Novartis have the possibility to provide their own ideas and have more freedom, and in general employees in an Asian country are less used to this. We had to be crystal clear on the definition. Of course, having a manager on the team is needed, but we do not want to have micro-management. The team needs to discuss the objectives, how to ethically reach the objectives, and, once the target is identified, they are quite flexible in their work.

Novartis is partnering with key health tech start-ups in Asia to bring transformative healthcare solutions to patients. Do you think that Thailand is ready for the digitalization of the healthcare industry?

Definitely, Thailand is very open to the digitalization of the healthcare industry. Novartis has many digital initiatives ongoing at the global level as well as through regional collaboration. For Thailand, we are looking at it very carefully, and we are currently focusing on digitalization for prevention. In Thailand, advertisements on TV to promote prevention and educate about diseases are quite limited. Therefore, we are using social media such as YouTube and Facebook to provide education for healthcare professionals and patients. We create awareness for medical professionals and medical societies because most of the information given to the patient is from their healthcare professionals. If healthcare professionals are well informed about the disease and treatment, the patient will benefit from the best quality of care.

Novartis Thailand has been very closely involved in supporting patients through patient programs and strong collaborations with various organizations. Can you highlight those initiatives and discuss the challenges and opportunities identified?

At the global level, Novartis has many different initiatives to treat malaria, leprosy and sickle cell disease, for example in Africa, as well as in China and Mexico. In Thailand, one initiative we are really proud of is our 15-year long-standing commitment and collaboration with BIOTEC. This

collaboration is a non-commercial bilateral collaboration on drug discovery programs. Novartis is collaborating with BIOTEC through the provision of consultation and mentoring to young scientists as they undertake projects to identify new substances and microorganisms. Over the years, the program has identified 30 new substances. We have supported the training of many Thai scientists at BIOTEC, by providing access to Novartis facilities in Switzerland, and by bringing some of our Novartis scientists to Thailand to provide consultations.

At the moment, we are working with patient groups focused on breast cancer. We are looking at other patient groups in areas such as leukaemia. We hope to be able to support those patient groups to increase awareness of the disease and available treatment options.

In 2018, over 24 million patients were reached through Novartis access programs, and over 17 million were reached by training, health education and service delivery. What is Novartis Thailand's corporate social responsibility (CSR) footprint?

Novartis Thailand is developing a number of CSR activities every year on a variety of themes. This year we focused on the environment. Last June, we took our employees and their families to Pattaya proximity to clean the beach area. We also managed to organize fundraising initiatives for a school for the deaf in the area. In previous years, we supported blind people and disabled children. Those CSR activities are well aligned with our vision and commitment to the patients and reinforce the sense of purpose as to why we exist as an organization in Thailand

What would you like to achieve in the next 5 years as the head of Novartis Thailand?

I hope to follow our five key priorities. We have already put in place active lines of collaboration with the different stakeholders, so I hope to carry on earning trust in society. We already have the right culture in place, being curious, inspired, and "un-bossed," so I plan to follow this path and attract the right people to our organization. A good example of taking care of our people is one of our employees who is transgender and had been struggling in her career. For the first time, at Novartis, she felt accepted and shared her story on our social media. I am convinced that actions speak louder than words "accepting and unleashing the power of people is very important.

One last thing I would like to achieve since I am Thai "I would like to see more highly capable local people in leadership positions. I am proud to work at Novartis and proud of all the activities and initiatives that we are putting in place. I believe that through doing the right thing for the patient, eventually, the performance will come.

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