

Article Title: [Ethics, Adaptation & Transformation: EP Plus Group's Way Forward]

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With the mission of making European pharmaceuticals and medical products accessible to patients in Southeast Asia, Malaysian pharmacist entrepreneur, Mr Tse-Ming PANG, established EP Plus Group (formerly known as Emerging Pharma) in 1997.

EP Plus Group has grown from a 5-staff strength company representing 2 European pharmaceutical companies, to a 160-staff strength company with over 15 principals offering more than 30 pharmaceutical and medical product brands to healthcare professionals in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei today.

Over the last 24 years, EP Plus Group has grown not only in size but acquired a unique skill set in commercialising pharmaceuticals and medical products to doctors, pharmacists, patients and consumers.

Driven by the core purpose of “Making a Difference in Improving Lives”, EP Plus Group has organised their business into three business units: *Pharmaceuticals*, *Fertility Sciences*, and *Medical Aesthetics*.

Following this chronicle, FLY Journalists - Tiffany Teng and Puteri Nelissa Milani had the honour of interviewing the Manager of the Business Development Department at EP Plus Group, Jean WONG, regarding the Group’s present undertakings as entrepreneurial representations of the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries. The article will delve into the economic factors of demand, production, pricing, and technology to effectively understand the events occurring in the healthcare industry amidst the pandemic.

Immunity Against the Pandemic?

We first begin by analysing if the prospect of the pharmaceutical industry had been negatively affected by the pandemic, or has instead recognized positive increases in its demand. With this narrative, Jean graciously mentions the equilibrium of benefits and costs experienced by EP Plus Group during the pandemic.

“It depends on how you look at it. Some of our products are COVID-proof, and some aren’t.”

In general, most industries, if not all, have been impacted by this unprecedented pandemic. As unemployment steadily increased and individuals began to shy away from healthcare establishments for fear of COVID-19, the retraction of social and economic activities had impacted the healthcare industry negatively. Jean further highlighted that factors like a reduction in environmental pollution due to increased shifts towards reducing or shutting down of economic activities, increasing focus in personal hygiene, and the limiting of social gatherings to curb the spread of the Co-V2-19 virus, were also social and economic changes that had impacted the healthcare industry in many ways.

“From our observations, healthcare products for infective or communicable diseases and elective procedures have generally reduced due to the lockdown of social, economic and educational activities since the second quarter of 2020. The demand for products for communicable diseases have reduced, ranging from 30 to 50%.”

Conversely, healthcare products that are considered essential or for long-term treatment had been minimally affected by the pandemic. For example, medications for the treatment of strokes, irritable bowel syndrome and functional constipation have attained better results than products for communicable diseases. Additionally at the retail front in pharmacies, products that boost the immune system and protective gears against COVID-19 are doing well.

Production, Supply, Safety

If there is one takeaway from the pandemic, it would be the fast production pace of the COVID-19 vaccine. Upon being queried whether this fast-paced vaccine development would affect the production pace of other drugs and medicinal products in the healthcare industry, Jean expressed that: *“The fast-paced COVID-19 vaccine development is critically needed for the public during this pandemic, thus, inevitably slowing down the development of drugs for other diseases. This is because all the resources in R&D would be halted and directed towards research on drugs that could be used to prevent or treat COVID-19.”*

When asked whether the Group’s own pace of production was affected by the pandemic, Jean stated that in line with many other businesses, the Group had sustained impacts towards their supply chain. She further explained: *“Our business model has always been to partner with European manufacturers to import our products to this region. Accordingly, the pandemic had definitely posted some challenges in providing this constant and uninterrupted supply of pharmaceutical and medicinal products. As the lockdown in major raw material producing countries have firstly, reduced the production yield of raw materials, and secondly, adversely led to irregular freight schedules and escalating transportation costs - this has disrupted the normal supply of non-COVID products and therefore, increased the cost of these goods.”*

Following this, the question of quality assurance to ensure that the end product is safe to consume, is equally as important. In answering the question posed, Jean reiterated that: *“The production and manufacturing of healthcare products are always very stringent, there is a need to follow certain standards regardless of being in a pandemic or not, one of which would be the GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices) standards. Hence, there is no compromise in terms of the safety and quality of the products during the pandemic.”*

PharmaTech

It is undeniable that the pharmaceutical industry and technology go hand in hand. In regards to the possibility of improvements in the Malaysian pharma-tech scene instigated by the pandemic, Jean’s thoughts are encompassed into one keyword: Digital Adoption.

Under COVID-19 circumstances, connectivity and communication continue to play an important role in our lives. We are adopting and adapting to a new way of communication. Virtual is the new visual and space moving forward. Jean defines the preceding by expressing that in-person interactions, coupled with analog technology like phone calls, and digital connections on social media and video conferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, would become the new normal for everyone progressing forward .

“In order to survive in the post-COVID world, we need to adopt the new Hybrid-World.”

Being an agile organisation, EP Plus Group has found its footing in the virtual sphere with Microsoft Office 365, whilst requiring the Group’s own system, *EPians* to familiarise and adopt the new communication platform.

“We are proud to announce that we managed to quickly pivot all our meetings to Hybrid-meetings (In-person-live and virtual concurrent). Moreover, to strengthen our digital presence, we are setting up and revamping our digital assets, beginning with our corporate websites, product microsites, e-commerce and social media platforms in preparation for the new normal.”

Following this, the Group had planned to move into the next phase of its digital transformation initiative in order to become a *“data driven decision making healthcare company”*. Jean noted on behalf of the Group that: *“We are collecting and organising our data by setting up our data hub and revamping our customer relationship management platform before harnessing the power of AI in our decision making.”*

Additionally, aligned with their mission to be a data-driven healthcare company, Jean agrees that the pandemic has accelerated this much-needed transformation. She mentioned that the Group is presently working on expansion through the development of its three key business units, believing that there is much more potential to be explored in these areas.

Digital adoption such as telemedicine, teleconsultation, digital marketing and e-commerce are some technological areas of opportunities that Malaysia’s healthcare industry has yet to explore and should begin exploring in the midst of the pandemic. Jean further states that digital intervention would inevitably alleviate the efficacy of Malaysia’s healthcare services in areas such as diagnostics and remote monitoring, whose improvements are really needed in these trying times.

EP Plus too has initiated digital adoption by exploring the area of digital therapeutics through the sourcing of products in relation to remote monitoring and remote diagnostics, with the aim of allowing patients to monitor their symptoms while staying at home.

The Outlook of The Pharmaceutical Industry

The healthcare and pharmaceutical industries are the few of many industries that thrived during the pandemic. Jean assures the industry’s outlook by stating:

“The pandemic will stay, it will reach a plateau. Regardless of when we recover, the need for healthcare services and its products are still present globally, there will always be a demand. The outlook of the pharmaceutical industry is positive as we move towards the new normal. The increasing health awareness created by COVID-19 would encourage the public to focus on maintaining good health either with or without medications. The pharmaceutical and healthcare industry has always been held in high esteem through providing essential services for the wellbeing of people.”

With the pandemic outbreak and the uncertainty that has rippled across the world, we concluded by requesting Jean for a piece of advice to the youths. She expressed her concerns empathetically as a healthcare industry representative by advising:

“Don’t fall into traps created by the falsification of products through social media. They may look promising, but be careful of these claims. Research these products thoroughly before deciding. Plus, be mindful of your self-care. Learn how to treat minor illnesses yourselves. Also, be prepared to adapt to the Hybrid world, where skill sets to engage people face-to-face and virtually are equally important for the future. Set the right attitude and behaviour towards responsibilities that are tasked to you. As technology hastens the pace of how everything works, do build up the value of integrity, take on personal responsibilities and innovate yourself.”