

“We are exploring synergies in India to support healthcare startups”

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Having an extensive experience of over 17 years, with nine years in the pharmaceutical industry, including varied roles across functions in national and global teams since joining Merck in October 2013, Pratima Reddy is the first woman Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for Merck Healthcare in India. Pratima Reddy stepped in as the Managing Director of Merck Specialities, the Healthcare Business of Merck KGaA in India three months ago, and is all set to take the business to the next level. In conversation with BioSpectrum, Pratima reveals the company’s future plans in detail.

How is Merck Healthcare India stepping up efforts to develop drugs for rare diseases?

Globally, one of the most focused areas for Merck KGaA is Multiple Sclerosis (MS). In India, the awareness around MS is not as wide as other markets in Asia-Pacific (APAC). We are always exploring opportunities to serve our patients better. If and when there is a good opportunity to be present strongly in this market, we will definitely consider it. We aim to improve care outcomes through innovative and high-quality products, disease outreach programmes, and awareness initiatives and make the patient's experience as stress-free as possible. At Merck, all our efforts are towards making a real difference in the lives of patients living with selected endocrine and metabolic disorders. In addition, we offer a vast range of treatments for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and thyroid disorders and are further working on them.

What major initiatives are being planned for 2023 by the healthcare division in India? Any significant agenda for diabetes?

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided on a strategy that will refresh and sharpen our teams' focus. We are pursuing a clear ambition with our "Mobilize for Growth" strategy. We want to become the global 21st-century science and technology pioneer. Our approach is about unlocking our full potential to take the company to the next level.

Merck Healthcare India is invested in bringing global brands to India to provide Indian patients with needed treatment therapies. The reviewed India strategy focuses on India strategy, mainly focusing on its three pillars:

- Advancing Science
- Accelerating Access
- Augmenting Investment

In India, Merck ranks 5th in the cardiovascular market, growing faster than the market. Our flagship brand Concor is amongst the top 15 brands for cardiac care in IPM (IQVIA). Our marketing activities are in full swing, but I would like to call out one particular campaign – The gratitude campaign - 'Connect to protect initiative', which created an Asia Book of Record for the most extensive digital drive of doctors to promote heart health (around 4700 docs).

In keeping with sustainable growth, fertility pioneered the launch of an environmentally friendly Gonal f slim pack, which provides 40% space savings and 33% lesser carbon footprints. With this launch, we continue to make a significant impact on families and the environment

Within our Oncology therapy unit, Bavencio launched last year, is already making a difference in patients' lives. Bavencio is a co-marketed drug by Merck and Pfizer in India and globally. Building conviction through in-market activities (global expert meets, and peer-to-peer meets) reached an all-time high this year.

We are on a mission: to help patients. To achieve this, we are united 'As One for Patients' to help create, improve and prolong lives – and ultimately offer the highest possible benefit to millions of people worldwide as One for Patients is our purpose – why we do what we do every day. It reflects how we think, act, care and succeed as a global team.

We are always exploring opportunities to serve our patients better. If and when there is a good opportunity to be present in the diabetes market I am sure we will consider it. Nothing at present.

Please highlight the developments in the oncology unit of Merck India and its future plans?

As early innovators in immuno-oncology and precision medicine, Merck continues to take a biology-focused approach as we develop our portfolio in the pipeline.

Bavencio (fully human anti-PD-L1 antibody launched in 2021) is indicated for advanced urothelial carcinoma (aUC), advanced renal cell carcinoma (aRCC) and Merkel cell carcinoma (MCC).

The globally acclaimed drug for treating three indications, was launched last year in India through our oncology therapy unit and is making a tremendous difference in patients' lives. With the unmet need of Indian cancer patients in these areas, Bavencio helps to be a beacon of hope for many.

Erbix, a targeted therapy against the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), is one of the most promising molecular therapeutics for head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC). Launched in 2006, Erbix continues to improve and save patient's life for earlier indications.

TEPMETKO, launched recently is the first and only oral MET inhibitor for treating adult patients with advanced NSCLC harboring alterations leading to METex14 skipping, who require systemic therapy following prior treatment.

We have moved from being a single brand portfolio to a multi-brand portfolio in just 15 months. This acceleration shows the need our country has to treat its patients.

How is Merck supporting healthcare innovation in India through startups? Please elaborate on the opportunities and challenges in store for healthcare startups?

Merck globally launched its Uptune programme in APAC for collaborating with the startups of across these markets. The aim of the programme is to collaborate with early-stage innovative companies that are working on relevant topics within healthcare, life science, electronics, and smart manufacturing, with a strong focus on solutions for digital health, innovative technologies/materials for semiconductors and display, cellular, molecular- and immuno-assays; cell and gene therapy tools, chemistry, and materials for life science, supply chain innovation, data management, simulation and analytics for manufacturing. We will not only provide the startups with the required funding but also help them with industry knowledge and expertise.

The nominated companies will receive up to € 100,000 in financial assistance, mentoring, and coaching from Merck's experts in research, business development, strategy and finance. To develop proofs-of-concept, the companies explore their understanding of business scenarios while catering to their needs and test their solutions on the global stage with Merck's global presence in 66 countries. This opportunity could help them to land a partnership with Merck or instrumental business cases.

Here in India, we are looking at possibilities to see how we can find synergies.

Any pointers that would give women aspiring to move up in their career, and the challenges that one should be prepared for?

Today's women are changing the game by shifting and diversifying their approach the concept of growth and development. Naturally, as a result there are far more women in leadership roles than in the past decade.

I want to encourage all aspiring women leaders to take smart risks by evaluating their strengths; one shouldn't be afraid to fail and make mistakes. We all juggle different roles in our lives; and we want to be just to each of them. Identify what works for you, for your growth and then decide. Once decided, go the extra mile to make it happen. I hope to see an increased number of women leaders not just in the pharma segment but in other industries too.

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