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Strengthening SEA regional cooperation to tackle Multiple Myeloma (MM) through early diagnosis and treatment

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Sarthak Ranade, Area Managing Director, Southeast Asia & India, Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine



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In the global context of cancer, multiple myeloma (MM) ranks as the third most prevalent blood cancer worldwide. Recent reports indicate a rising incidence of MM in Asian countries such as Thailand, Korea, and Taiwan. Often considered 'incurable' and frequently undetected, MM is typically diagnosed at a late stage, leaving patients with limited treatment options by the time of diagnosis. Therefore, improving access to innovative therapies is crucial.

Pharmaceutical firms like Johnson & Johnson's recently approved drugs for multiple myeloma (MM) have revolutionized the treatment landscape and have enabled patients to live longer after diagnosis. However, economic disparities, healthcare infrastructure, and access to new medications vary across Asian countries, potentially impeding optimal myeloma care in resource-limited settings.

J&J Innovative Medicine (IM) are trying to work with regional governments and other key stakeholders to facilitate patient access to innovative therapeutics, to give patients more options and ensure that they have the right channels to access reimbursements in key markets like Thailand. **Sarthak Ranade**, **Area Managing Director for Southeast Asia and India, J&J IM,** shared added insights navigating through Southeast Asia's potentials and challenges to tackle Multiple Myeloma (MM), especially in Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand.

- **How do you describe the current burden of Multiple Myeloma (MM) in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand? In light of the global trends, why is early detection of MM so crucial?**

Multiple myeloma (MM) is a serious blood cancer that affects plasma cells in the bone marrow, leading to complications like bone fractures and kidney failure. While less common in Thailand than in Western countries, the number of cases has been rising with an incidence of 2 cases per 100,000 people annually. Early detection is vital, allowing patients to manage their symptoms and any complications more effectively, ultimately enhancing treatment outcomes and quality of life.

However, patients with MM face several challenges. Frequent relapses lead to progressively shorter survival times after each relapse, making it harder for them to live longer. This complicates their treatment. Additionally, access to innovative therapies for relapsed or refractory Multiple Myeloma (RRMM), is often difficult due to high costs and regulatory delays. These factors underline the urgent need for improved access to treatments and supportive measures to help manage the disease effectively.

It is increasingly evident that to continue optimizing outcomes in multiple myeloma, we must intervene early with the most effective therapies. A recommendation by the Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use (CHMP) of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to extend the indication of Daratumumab when combined with bortezomib, lenalidomide, and dexamethasone for treating adult patients with newly diagnosed multiple myeloma, regardless of transplant eligibility, has been approved.

- **What are the key barriers to early detection and diagnosis of MM? How can we overcome these challenges ?**

Many healthcare providers and the public may not be familiar with the early signs and symptoms of MM, leading to delayed diagnosis. Common symptoms, such as fatigue, bone pain, and kidney issues, can be nonspecific and easily attributed to other conditions. Another barrier includes the fragmented healthcare systems that can contribute to delays in patient referrals and access to specialists.

To overcome the challenges, implementing awareness campaigns targeted at both healthcare professionals and the public can improve understanding of MM symptoms and develop integrated healthcare systems that foster collaboration among primary care physicians and specialists. It also improves patient pathways and reduces delays in diagnosis and ensure patients receive timely evaluations as well as strengthening regional collaborations with the Asian Myeloma Network to drive research, improve access and address healthcare gaps.

- **How is J&J Innovative Medicine supporting efforts in the region to improve access to innovative therapies through early detection in collaboration with governments and healthcare stakeholders?**

Johnson & Johnson continues to innovate with its first-in-class treatment options for multiple myeloma. At Johnson & Johnson (J&J) Innovative Medicine, we are deeply committed to advancing early detection and expanding access to therapies like *Daratumumab* and *Teclistamab* and improving patients' outcomes across the region. A comprehensive range of therapeutics, from *Bortezomib*, in partnership with Millennium Pharmaceuticals, to *Daratumumab*, improve outcomes in the relentless quest to conquer multiple myeloma.

We collaborate with medical societies, healthcare professionals, health authorities and patient advocacy groups to improve MM care. We also organise programmes like the Haematology Immersion Program (HIP) and "New Era for Multiple Myeloma: Optimize Triple Class Exposure RRMM outcomes with Bispecific Antibodies in Real-World Settings," where we bring together global MM experts on MM to share their knowledge and insights with experts in this region to enhance their understanding of MM and how we can help patients manage it.

Prior to Teclistamab's approval by the Thai Food and Drug Administration, our Medical Affairs (MAF) team facilitates unsolicited requests for access to Teclistamab through an Early Access Program to assist patients with unmet needs who cannot be treated with currently available medications in Thailand.

- **What are J&J Innovative Medicine's access and reimbursement strategies? For high-cost treatments, how does J&J Innovative Medicine work with patient assistance programs?**

By highlighting the benefits of innovative medicine and advocating for healthcare investments that ensure sustainable access, we are committed to patient-centred engagement. From the payer's perspective, budget constraints are certainly a challenge, but we're actively seeking alternative financing options that balance fiscal management and patient access.

For seven years, the Advanced Payment System under the Civil Servant Medical Benefit Scheme (CSMBS) has allowed myeloma patients early access to innovative treatments to address unmet medical needs. The CSMBS reimbursement scheme plays a vital role in ensuring that civil servants and their families have access to necessary medical treatments while promoting a sustainable healthcare environment in Thailand. We appreciate this forward-thinking initiative by the Thai government that shows a strong commitment to enhancing healthcare access and improving the overall well-being of the community.

Beyond reimbursement, we're also exploring ways such as patient assistance program to make treatments more affordable for multiple myeloma patients in Thailand. One exciting area we're exploring is healthcare partnerships, including collaborations with private health insurers, to create comprehensive programmes that support patients throughout their care journey.

- **How is J&J Innovative Medicine addressing the challenges associated with MM treatment through its collaborative approach in Thailand and beyond?**

As part of J&J Innovative Medicines' MM treatment, we focus on improving the patient experience by tackling key challenges related to diagnosis, molecular testing, and treatment outcomes. We work closely with medical societies to run educational programmes and workshops, ensuring healthcare professionals (HCPs) are aware of the latest advancements in medicine. One of our key initiatives is our collaboration with medical institutes in Thailand, where we're integrating Minimal Residual Disease (MRD) testing into everyday clinical practice.

We believe that MRD testing can play a crucial role in improving patient outcomes by helping doctors make better treatment decisions. In the future, MRD could be an important prognostic tool, ultimately ensuring that every patient gets the best possible care tailored to their needs.

J&J Innovative Medicines has ventured successful collaborations focusing on key areas like medical education, a multidisciplinary approach to care, and patient advocacy – all of which are vital to improving outcomes for MM patients. This collaboration will provide physicians with valuable insights to guide their treatment decisions, and that's one of the areas we're exploring. Patients are at the forefront of this initiative, ensuring they receive the best possible care. We're excited to see how these collaborations impact patients beyond just the countries where we currently work.

By focusing on local partnerships and truly understanding the community's needs, health initiatives are more likely to be sustainable and effective. To ensure that programs are making a real difference, HCPs should be trained and continuously evaluated. In addition to engaging patients, we strive to shape our care based on their perspectives. A holistic approach not only improves patient outcomes, but also strengthens the healthcare system, creating long-term improvements.

At J&J Innovative Medicine, we're committed to changing what's possible for multiple myeloma patients. Our goal isn't just to manage the disease—we're working towards a cure. By ensuring the right treatments are used early and in the most effective combinations, we're aiming to help more than half of patients achieve remission by 2030. To get there, we're focused on providing personalised, effective treatment options tailored to each patient's needs at every stage of their journey. It's about making sure they get the right care at the right time, with the hope of truly changing the course of the disease.