

Challenges teach you a lot about yourself: Julie Philips

07 March 2013 | Influencers | By BioSpectrum Bureau

Challenges teach you a lot about yourself: Ms Julie Philips, CEO, Biodiem, Australia



"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal." – Henry Ford

I started my career with a Bachelor of Pharmacy and worked as a clinical pharmacist at Sydney and Westmead Hospitals between 1978 and 1984. This involved participation in ward rounds to contribute information and discuss elements of a patient's treatment as well as the traditional dispensing role. It was an enormously valuable opportunity and I was able to see and learn about many different therapeutic areas from paediatrics, infectious diseases, and cardiovascular to oncology. I then went back to Sydney University and completed a Master of Science degree, submitting research investigating the different way elderly patients handle treatment by some antibiotics.

When I finished my Master of Science degree in 1984, I moved into my first multi-national pharmaceutical company role working in regulatory affairs. This included preparing the dossiers to gain approval to either conduct clinical trials or market new drugs, and medical information. The role gave me a good appreciation of the rigor and requirements needed to get a drug on the market.

I then went back to work in the public sector, at Concord Hospital, managing their clinical trial program and sat on the Drugs and Ethics Committees. This was a part time role because I was also looking after three young children at home.

My career then changed gear and I was attracted to the Swiss multinational pharma giant, Sandoz, where I worked my way

up into senior management at its Australian affiliate organization. My department was responsible for regulatory affairs, quality assurance, medical information and pharmacoconomics for the Australian and NZ group. This was followed by a similar role at the contract research group (CRO) Covance.

I was actually head hunted out of Covance for my first biotech role as CEO of Hyal Pharmaceutical in 1997. I had just completed my Master of Business Administration (MBA) and I saw the CEO role as a chance to integrate the skills I had picked up from my MBA with my industry experience gathered while working in regulatory affairs and pricing, and practical experience as a pharmacist.

Working in the biotech industry provides many opportunities to move up within your organization because the companies tend to be smaller and your role needs to be quite broad. In a much larger company, your role is more likely to be quite specific to your area of expertise.

When I joined BioDiem in 2009, my focus was on diversifying our product portfolio and growing revenue streams. In the last few years, we've focussed on the highly attractive markets of infectious diseases and vaccines, expanded our asset base by in-licensing three world-class Australian technologies, and promoted our LAIV-based flu vaccine business, which is already generating revenues through partnerships in India and China. In addition, we are continuing to discover new indications for our BDM-I antimicrobial compound, which is active against a range of infectious diseases. In summary, it's a very exciting time for BioDiem and I'm very proud to be a part of it.

Taking up challenges

Completing my Master of Science research whilst heavily pregnant is something that definitely stands out in my memory. It was a wonderful and very challenging time, but it just goes to show what you can achieve if you really want something. Later in my career, I went back to university to complete an MBA while working full time with three young children. Both experiences were meaningful, because it's those sort of challenges that teach you a lot about yourself. I've learnt that perseverance is one of the most important attributes a person can have to achieve their goals.

Entering the workforce from a science background, I previously hadn't had to think about the financial side of medical treatments. However, taking a role in regulatory affairs and pricing was a real turning point for me because I was able to gain a greater insight into the importance of economic analysis in the justification of different medical or surgical treatments. For example, if a treatment was very cheap but not very effective, it would be much more cost-effective to use a more expensive drug that cured faster. All of a sudden, I was seeing financials as a way to make a better market case and drive resource allocation. This then inspired me to go back to university and complete my MBA. Now, when I make business decisions at BioDiem, there is a raft of factors I take into account, which I can attribute to my diverse background.

It's definitely less stressful to look back on a hurdle now than it was when I was facing it. In 2009, we found out our major flu vaccine licence was being acquired through a merger and acquisition transaction. We suspected that we would lose our licence and the attaching income stream, and have the rights returned to us. Whereas this loss of income did turn out to be the case, we worked very hard on the opportunity that the return of rights presented to us. We converted the return licence rights into a new business opportunity for BioDiem and it is our "LAIV vector" project. We now have the worldwide rights to this opportunity to create many new vaccines against cancers and infectious diseases as well as influenza.

Beyond BioDiem

I'm not sure she is exactly my role model, but I have long-adored Eva Cox. She is an Australian feminist who delivers her views most passionately on building a better society. Eva has featured in my life since I became politically aware in my twenties. I love the way she is - fearless, politically astute and highly intelligent, and would love to be more like her to help drive the needed social change.

At the moment I'm really interested in finding out more about my family history. I'm using ancestry.com to trace generations of my family tree. Turns out that there are a plenty of very strong women ancestors and also quite a few convicts.

I am most fortunate to have a very exciting job, and this makes it easier to find the energy to go to work every day. My family and friends are all encouraging, but I make it a priority to balance work, family, friends and exercise.

I think our company BioDiem is at a very exciting stage right now and we're seeing some of the hard work really crystallise into revenues. We have a flu technology licenced to the World Health Organisation for the developing world. And we have BDM-I, our antimicrobial, which has the potential to be a life-saving treatment for a range of infectious diseases and that is a

strong motivator for me. My current focus is seeing BDM-I on the market and treating patients.

My message to young women is that one must get a good university education and decide what to do. Don't worry too much about what other people think. If you need some advice, find some experienced mentors. Then really believe in yourself and go for it.

(As told to Amrita Tejasvi)