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Accelerating Access and Seizing Growth in the Expanding Healthcare Markets in SE Asia

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Bijay Singh, Head Business Unit Healthcare, DKSH "Healthcare demand in Southeast Asia is accelerating rapidly, driven by population growth projected to outpace other regions. Despite the regionâ??s economic growth and healthcare advancements, Southeast Asia still encounters challenges in accessing equitable care due to a shortage of healthcare workers and fragmented health systems."



Global health disparities have been identified as one of the most severe public health threats of the century, which places a strong emphasis on healthcare equity. Health outcomes, access to health care, and unmet health needs remain major concerns in South-East Asia as well. The region majorly faces challenges in health equity, with huge population unable to access social health insurance, and access to basic healthcare facilities. Asia is focusing on healthcare reform in the wake of the recent pandemic. Thus, it is now vital to establish strong mitigation strategies to boost health equity and eliminate existing health disparities particularly for vulnerable groups.

In an interview with Biospectrum Asia, **DKSH's Head of Business Unit Healthcare, Bijay Singh** discussed the need to strengthen the health ecosystem in the region.

- **What are your perspectives on Southeast Asia's healthcare landscape in terms of global healthcare opportunities? How is DKSH Healthcare strategising to capitalise on these transformations?**

Healthcare demand in Southeast Asia is accelerating rapidly, driven by population growth projected to outpace other regions. Despite the region's economic growth and healthcare advancements, Southeast Asia still encounters challenges in accessing equitable care due to a shortage of healthcare workers and fragmented health systems. Rapid urbanization has also contributed to a rising burden of non-communicable diseases in the region. This presents a significant opportunity for healthcare companies to focus on proactive healthcare approaches that empower individuals to manage their own health and

ease the strain on healthcare systems.

At DKSH Healthcare, we recognize the ongoing transformation towards proactive healthcare management and are committed to sharing our regional expertise and distribution network to help improve healthcare access in the region. We prioritize building collaborative relationships with both global and local healthcare providers, navigating the complexities of regulatory environments, and adapting our healthcare solutions to the diverse needs of Southeast Asia's populations.

We are also focusing on investing in digital innovation in the space to improve service delivery and foster better communication between healthcare providers and patients. One such example is ConnectPlus, a data-driven customer relationship management (CRM) and multi-channel engagement (MCE) platform we are introducing in partnership with Euris. It integrates digital touch points with face-to-face sales, improving access to quality care while enhancing the patient journey with data-driven strategies. Through efforts in digital innovation, we hope to promote equitable access to healthcare, enhance patient outcomes, and contribute positively to the overall development of the region's healthcare landscape.

- **How do you perceive the recent policy reforms across various Southeast Asian countries impacting the healthcare sector?**

As countries in the region work towards policy reforms like Universal Healthcare Coverage (UHC), this involves strengthening primary care systems and expanding health insurance coverage to make healthcare more affordable. With that said, the systems within each nation are still evolving rapidly as governments look to the global healthcare landscape for benchmarking and best practices.

Take, for example, the efforts by the local government in **Thailand** to launch its UHC programme in 2002. Also known as the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) or "30-baht scheme", it aims to provide comprehensive healthcare to all citizens. Since then, the programme has expanded its network to include contracted clinics and pharmacies that target local communities seeking convenient primary care services. This year, the Thai National Health Security Office expanded its pilot areas, allowing UCS beneficiaries to access health services at any facility, regardless of their registered health provider. This new benefit has brought about greater convenience for patients, encouraging many to seek care, especially those far from hospital or living outside their home provinces.

Malaysia has also been actively working to expand its UHC coverage and improve the quality of healthcare services. Recently, the Malaysian government has been addressing healthcare accessibility through its infrastructure development in remote areas. This includes building new healthcare facilities and investing in telemedicine and mobile health clinics to reach populations in underserved regions. In collaboration with the World Health Organization, Malaysia has also initiated a comprehensive health education programme to promote preventive healthcare practices and raise awareness of the importance of early medical intervention.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for robust public health systems as well. We see ASEAN countries like **Singapore** investing in emergency preparedness, improving disease surveillance, and fortifying laboratory services. The Singapore government continues to invest in its National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) and public health infrastructures, emphasising the importance of rapid response protocols and local manufacturing capabilities for essential medical supplies.

Meanwhile, **Vietnam** has established a rapid response task force to coordinate future outbreaks and stockpile essential medical supplies. Additionally, the country is focused on upgrading its national laboratory network and enhancing biosafety and biosecurity measures. The government also invests in training healthcare professionals in advanced laboratory techniques to ensure rapid and accurate disease diagnosis.

- **What are the key challenges faced by private-sector healthcare companies when fostering private-public collaborations to bridge healthcare gaps in Southeast Asia?**

To tackle accessibility gaps in Southeast Asia's healthcare landscape, public-private partnerships are becoming vital for delivering affordable, high-quality services. Governments increasingly recognize the need to collaborate with the private sector to enhance local healthcare infrastructure, invest in research and development, and tailor services to specific community needs. As demand grows, private sector players focus on developing affordable care models and pricing strategies to serve low- and middle-income populations, alleviating financial burdens on patients.

Innovative care delivery models, like telehealth and homecare services, are being pioneered to improve access, particularly in remote areas. These models bring healthcare directly to patients, while technology such as electronic health records and telemedicine platforms enhances service accessibility. As private insurance expands, collaboration between private payers and providers becomes essential, ensuring that necessary care is financially accessible.

However, private-sector companies face challenges in fostering public-private collaborations due to Southeast Asia's complex regulatory landscape, which consists of 11 distinct markets. Many global healthcare firms struggle with navigating these regulations and overcoming language barriers, which can hinder effective engagement and lead to suboptimal patient outcomes. To address these issues, partnering with organizations with expertise in quality assurance and regulatory affairs is crucial, ensuring compliance and facilitating timely market entry for healthcare solutions.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing interest from global companies to localise services and strengthen relationships, supported by increased government funding aimed at achieving universal health coverage. For example, DKSH's partnership with Ramathibodi Hospital, the leading public hospital in Thailand, has led to the launch of Home Pulse, a homecare service that allows healthcare professionals to collect and test blood and urine specimens at patients' homes. This initiative exemplifies how public-private partnerships can effectively address accessibility challenges, particularly for the approximately 50% of Southeast Asia's population lacking access to essential health services, as reported by the World Health Organization.

- **What strategies would you recommend to healthcare companies aiming to seize growth opportunities in Southeast Asia's expanding healthcare markets while ensuring equitable access for all populations?**

First, forming strategic partnerships with local healthcare providers, government agencies, and NGOs can significantly enhance service delivery and help navigate the complex regulatory landscape. Collaborating with organisations that understand regional nuances, such as DKSH Healthcare, which has strong healthcare expertise and a dedicated team of over 90 quality assurance and regulatory affairs in-country specialists, will enable companies to develop solutions that resonate with local populations.

Second, creating tailored products and services that address the specific needs of diverse communities is essential. By considering cultural, economic, and health-related factors, private healthcare companies can ensure their offerings are both relevant and accessible to a wide range of consumers. DKSH Healthcare is the one-stop partner for healthcare companies looking to grow their business in Asia Pacific, providing commercial outsourcing services, distribution and logistics, regulatory expertise, digital market expansion, and Patient Solutions Program.

Finally, investing in health awareness initiatives will empower individuals to make informed healthcare decisions and create a community to support the marginalised. Community outreach programs, such as DKSH's Patient Purpose Day 2024, educate local populations about the importance of supporting the region's ageing populations through collaborative community efforts.

At DKSH Healthcare, we are dedicated to enriching people's lives and providing better healthcare for all patients in our markets. We achieve this by consistently delivering a wide range of quality and reliable healthcare product solutions while emphasizing quality and compliance. Accordingly, DKSH will continue to expand its strong market position in the future.

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