

October 28, 2020

Welcome to WoW, the Woman of the Week podcast series. This episode was made possible by a generous sponsorship from Elligo Health Research. For more information, visit elligohealthresearch.com.

In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine, meets with Helen Lee, MD, President and CEO, Samyang Biopharmaceuticals USA.

Taren: Helen, welcome to the WoW podcast program. And congratulations on being named the PharmaVOICE 100 this year.

Dr. Lee: Thank you very much for having me and giving me this great opportunity to talk to you on Happy Friday.

Taren: The Happy Friday, yes. Happy Friday, too. Helen, you were named President and CEO of the US-based arm of Samyang Biopharmaceuticals in 2018 after bringing your expansion plan to the board. This was a pretty bold move. I was really impressed when I read this. How did you convince them to open the US subsidiary in Cambridge?

Dr. Lee: Well, it was not easy, of course, as you can imagine. It is very difficult to develop new drugs in Korea and market them in the US later. So I saw if the Samyang was serious about developing new biologics, we need to come to the US, where the resources existed with people with experience. And I was interested in having Samyang considered changing the drug development process, as historically existed within the company and also want improvements to make in the future, particularly as the company was considering to open the US subsidiary.

Before I joined Samyang, I worked at Baxalta, then Shire, which was the headquarter in Cambridge. So through my own experience of working in Cambridge, I knew Cambridge was the best place for the biotech companies pursuing innovation. I was able to show them a long list. Samyang's drug development strategy was to in-license late stage compounds. This was more readily available in the Cambridge area, where hundreds of potential partners were headquartered.

So our new Cambridge location allowed us easy access to numerous small biotechs in Cambridge, plus, our Cambridge location also offered proximate access to Boston area research institutes and hospitals that could be sized for the additional R&D programs, as well as clinical trial.

Taren: So you really are in the hotbed there where everything is popping biotech, so it's got to be exciting process.

Dr. Lee: Yeah, we are very excited. And we made quite of progress since we opened our office.

Taren: Well, congratulations to you. You made another bold move, leaving the practice of medicine as an ob-gyn to become a biopharmaceutical scientist. What led you to make this leap? Not many women have the guts to do that.

Dr. Lee: Yeah, that's just not an easy decision. I love the medicine. I recognized early on in my career that I had a heart for research because the research team environment provides me with an opportunity to learn something new on my own as well as from other scientists, which was very exciting. So when the opportunity of working at Pfizer came to me, before I made the decision, I talked to my best friend since childhood. Surprisingly, she said, Wow, this is actually what you wrote in your essay at high school. You wanted to do traditional, working at a pharmaceutical company for new drug development because then you can treat the millions of patients if you develop a new drug, whereas you can treat only a limited number of patients at a hospital.

So this conversation truly helped me transition from practice medicine to areas closer to the development of new medicine. As a President and CEO of Samyang Biopharm USA, I'm also in the position to lead the business and R&D team that can make life-altering medicines available to tens or hundreds of thousands of patients globally, which is a far cry from the thousands of patients I may have treated as a physician.

Taren: I think it's so amazing that how prophetic that was, that you knew what you wanted to do before you knew what you wanted to do.

Dr. Lee: Yeah.

Taren: So do me a favor and lead me through some of your career milestones that eventually led you to this, please?

Dr. Lee: Yes. In Eli Lilly, I worked as a medical lead for head and neck cancer indication for Erbitux, leading the development of registration of strategy and clinical trials. So we successfully received approval from the FDA in 2011. After leaving Eli Lilly, I joined the Baxalta as one of the initial members of Baxalta oncology and played an important role in developing strategies for oncology therapeutic area, working with the amazing cross-functional teams and presenting the strategy to a CEO. It was a really starting opportunity for me.

After setting up the strategy, I led this execution through evaluating external licensing opportunities while ensuring efficient advancement of clinical programs from the registration process to success for commercialization. After that, at Shire as a Clinical Head of Solid tumor franchise, I successfully led the on-buy progress to receiving approval in pancreatic cancer from DNA in 2016.

When Samyang approached me, they were looking for someone who is a scientist with a business development experience and potential in addition to R&D experience. So my

experience in drug development and approval, setting an oncology therapeutic strategy and executing it through licensing activities, rather fit their profile.

Taren: That's awesome. So you really do combine the heart and the mind of an entrepreneur and innovator. Through all those roles, you've really increased, like your responsibility, but also pushed the science forward. So when you are looking for assets to develop or acquire at Samyang, what are those compounds? What are those assets look like for you? What excites you about this job?

Dr. Lee: Yeah, this really is related to why I left the hospital and joined the pharmaceutical industry. So I look for a company that incorporates innovation to meet unmet medical needs and help patients.

Taren: Excellent. And one of the recent collaborations you entered into was with CanCure, LLC. Tell me about this partnership and what that's going to do for Samyang.

Dr. Lee: This is the story. In 2018, I attended a summit in Cambridge and listened to a presentation from the CEO of CanCure, Dr. Jennifer Wu. It provides me the opportunity to learn and understand the science behind the compound on issue she was presenting. I was impressed with not only the innovation science of the compound and her expansive knowledge but also her passion that drove her to make a difference in patients' lives.

Her company was close to my office in the Chicago area at the time, just 10 minutes' walking distance. So I walked to her office and live with her on subsequent occasions where we talked in depth about the drug and the science behind it. During those meetings, I discovered first, she was working mom like me and we're great scientists of drugs and we build trust, I think. It allowed me to convince her to wait until I create a larger R&D team at Samyang USA because I was the only one at the time and getting ready to conduct the due diligence of the compound.

She was looking for a small biotech company to partner with rather than a giant global company. And Samyang's non-VC profile with stable finance backed up by a parent company which made it attractive to her.

Taren: That's fantastic. So when she was looking for a small biotech to partner up with, maybe not that small initially, right? There's two of you, two women of high power connecting, that doesn't often happen either. So to find another kindred spirit is really quite remarkable.

Dr. Lee: Yeah, I think so. So I think we had everything in common. As I said it before, both of us were working moms and scientists and she is Asian and female. So these common things really gave us kind of a good bonding and great opportunity to work together.

Taren: Absolutely. That's wonderful. So tell me how you would describe your leadership style. I would imagine that the work you have to do as the leader of this company, you have to work with a lot of VC companies, you have to work with your parent company. And as a woman,

that's not always the easiest position to be in. Sometimes, you're like, probably the only woman in the room. So tell me about that piece of your world?

Dr. Lee: Yes, definitely. Many times, I'm the only female and also a colored people, I must say, so having kind of two minorities in a meeting room. But I think at the end of the day, that's not what's important, but I think my leadership style is really about people. So I dislike micromanagement, and develop trusting colleagues. Once I trust people to do their job and do it well, I encourage an independent relationship where I am always available but do not have people under a microscope.

I have a transparent and hands-on management style and believe in leading by doing, especially in a small company like Samyang, I get to wear many different hats and experience all facets of the company which allows me to understand different job functions, of course. And I tried to get to know them as people and be like a friend rather than just be their boss.

Taren: Gotcha. Do you like having or being able to wear all those hats?

Dr. Lee: Could you just say it again?

Taren: Sure. Do you like wearing all those different hats? Do you like being involved in so many different areas of the company?

Dr. Lee: Well, I must say yes and no because I'm a person who are very curious, being involved in many different areas, which are to me, exciting and interesting. But because I know I'm not the expert in every area and sometimes I had to do self-study in order to understand what they're talking about, it gives me a kind of challenges. So from that perspective, I must say yes and no.

Taren: I think that's fair enough. So, as you were coming up through big pharma and through your medical career, is there anything that you know now that you wish you had known then? If you could go back and tell something to your younger self, what would that be?

Dr. Lee: Yeah, you have to hire people. And I have made many mistakes in hiring and not based those decisions on the right criteria. So it takes time to get the right people in place and you need the patience, especially when starting a company like the Samyang Biopharm. Attracting and hiring the right people is the key. So my previous mistakes have helped me tremendously to hire more suitable people for Samyang USA. Now, I have a great team here. I look for a fit, both in experience and a personability to fit into a particular corporate culture.

Taren: Interesting. I ask that question to all the women who come on the program. And that's the first time that somebody has said that they would go back and look at how they hire folks. So what are those traits you look for in those people who you want to bring up to the ranks? Curiosity, I would imagine is one thing.

Dr. Lee: Yes. So just to me, for each position, there is some list of profile. So, for example, if I hire a head of clinical development, there's a certain criteria for that from the expertise and experience point of view. But also, it's important for them to have the shift to the culture of our company, especially our company is not a giant global company, but rather a small biotech company, also our parent company's career.

So the cultural difference is in terms of big versus small and Korean and also American maybe can play important role in terms of working together with others and also working together with the parent company. So those aspects are very important. And also, I like people who have genuine passion for drug development.

Taren: Excellent. And you really do need to have a passion for drug development because it's hard and you really have to love what you do.

Dr. Lee: Exactly. Yeah. It takes a long time. It really requires patience.

Taren: Yes. And fortitude and resilience. Helen, finally, tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that either shaped or transformed your career.

Dr. Lee: Yes. Moving to the US and joining the global team at Eli Lilly was the moment which transformed my career. If probably I need a totally different career path that I had been on as a medical director in London and Korea. In Korea affiliate, I was responsible for only executing part of a corporate plan. And onto joining a global team, I have never been involved in such an endeavor.

In global team, I was asked to develop a multilayered plan that included drug development strategy, clinical trial protocol, and led all the clinically related regulatory discussions with FDA. What a great opportunity to write a host of new path and it showed me the importance of doing my homework on each compound and how it fits into the overall drug strategy. So I had to work very hard and committing myself learning as much as I could. I was usually the last one to leave the office after all the lights had turned off.

Taren: Well, all that homework and all that hard work paid off because look at where you are now. And you balance that because you also have children, right? You said earlier that you're also a working mom.

Dr. Lee: Yes. Of course, working mom is one of the most difficult jobs in the world, I think. But at the same time, having kids around me give me the motivation and encouragement, and healing. So I have to say, I'm so grateful for having children and have a career and enjoying both of them.

Taren: Well, kudos to you. And congratulations again on being named a PharmaVOICE 100 and it was really lovely to spend some time with you, Helen. Thank you so much for sharing your story.



Dr. Lee: Thank you very much, Taren.

Thank you for listening to this episode of WoW, the Woman of the Week podcast. And thanks to Elligo Health research for making this episode possible. For more information, visit elligohealthresearch.com, and don't forget to check out our other episodes of WoW at pharmavoice.com/wow.