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What COVID-19 taught us

In this year-ender edition, experts reflect on the biggest lessons for India Pharma Inc from the current pandemic



By **Lakshmi Priya Nair**

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Pandemics like the Bubonic plague and the Spanish Flu were followed by sweeping social, economic and cultural transformations. They also galvanised great improvements in medical science and public policy.

Today, the world confronts and battles another pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus and again this period could be marked by great change and reforms.

*Therefore, this year-ender edition, which also marks **Express Pharma's 26th Anniversary**, presents some insights and learnings which will be crucial for India Pharma Inc to survive and thrive in the post-pandemic world.*

The pandemic gave the pharma industry an opportunity to reassess its role

COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest humanitarian challenges. We are learning about the virus and the virus is spreading at an unprecedented rate.

While the pandemic posed several new challenges, it also gave the pharma industry an opportunity to reassess its role and emerge as a reliable supplier of high-quality, affordable medicines. This has been a period of significant learning for the Indian industry on all fronts.



*Sudarshan Jain, Secretary-General,
Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance
(IPA)*

Collaboration is the key: The industry worked relentlessly to provide an uninterrupted supply of medicines in India and across the world. The integrated efforts by the industry, Government of India and other stakeholders such as transporters, supply chain partners made it possible for a quick turn-around.

Proactiveness – the need of the hour: The pandemic demanded agility and proactiveness. This began by classifying medicines as essential goods to manufacture and transport including applying for emergency approvals for manufacturing and testing for newer treatments.

Innovation paved the way: The industry responded promptly by evaluating possible utilisation of available drugs (repurpose drugs) and exploring more innovative approaches. Indian companies are engaged in developing indigenous vaccines that are currently undergoing testing for efficacy and safety.

Resilience in the supply chain: We have to be self-reliant in the API landscape to ensure a continuous supply of medicine which is fundamental for the healthcare security

The Indian pharma industry is an asset and is committed as a consistent and reliable supplier of life-saving medicines to India and the world. As truly the 'Pharmacy of the World, India will continue to be at the forefront to be of service to the nation and the world.

There is a renewed realisation of the need to invest in public health

Great adversity also brings disruption and discovery. The pandemic has held lessons for humanity, governments, individuals and businesses.

The industry at the centre of it has been the life sciences and healthcare industry. From testing to prevention and from treatment to monitoring it has been a complex web of collaboration and cooperation between academia, research organisations, global public health bodies, pharma, medical technology and healthcare delivery players.



Charu Sehgal, Partner and Lifesciences and Healthcare Industry Leader, Deloitte India

The first realisation has been of the criticality of the healthcare sector especially of public health. It was assumed that issues of public health impacted the poor and the rural and therefore it did not interest the elite as much. However, it is for the first time that the rich are looking up at public health institutions for updates on its spread or data on deaths or cure of even advice on prevention. It has therefore brought to the forefront the need for governments to invest on public health institutions including epidemiology, research and development and public health delivery

Second, has been the rapid increase in collaborations and alliances across the world. In an attempt to find vaccines and treatment drugs governments across countries have collaborated with global public health and research institutions as well as with large businesses to expedite the discovery of solutions. Not only that, there has been an amazing increase in the speed of granting approvals and cutting of inefficiencies in order to facilitate the processes. I feel the world will only build on this spirit of leveraging each other's strengths and working towards a greater good.

Third, has been the need to reimagine supply chains and build more resilience. Over-reliance on a few countries or geographies, especially for life-saving items like drugs and medical supplies, can lead to a crisis in times of a disruption in that part like it did in the case of China lockdown. Across the world businesses and nations are figuring out how to diversify their supply chains. Some are looking inwards others are shifting suppliers. The call for self-reliant India is a fall out of this realisation. This pandemic has led to the Indian government providing a strong focus and incentives for

strengthening the pharma and medical device industry, including helping them move up the value chain to become self-reliant as well as to offer an alternative manufacturing hub for the world.

Four, for the first time, given the lack of visibility into the future, the companies were unable to plan for the long term. It led to companies becoming more agile as well as being prepared for many scenarios. Decision making had to be decentralised. Short term solutions and Innovations were encouraged. This again will change the way businesses think and plan.

Five, the pandemic brought home the stark and depressing reality of the large number of people who live on the edge, especially in India. The need to provide a social security net to the millions whose very existence was threatened by the disruption on economic activity was recognised the world over.

Six, a significant change which is here to stay has been the acceptance of Work from Home. It has proved to be the biggest disruption and all levels and all types of work has been successfully done from home. Technology has been geared up to tackle all issues of infrastructure connectivity and security. Most companies admit that they will never go back to the same level of office space in the future.

The last significant change has been the acceleration of the digital transformation of businesses and households. Telemedicine, online teaching, e-commerce and fintech have emerged in a big way. It is unlikely that these trends will be reversed.

To conclude, the world has changed forever. Several business paradigms have been changed and new realities emerged. On the one hand, the importance of cooperation for the larger good has emerged but so has the need for self-reliance. There is a renewed realisation of the need to invest in public health.

Learning, adaptability, flexibility, collaboration and innovation are key to success

The COVID-19 pandemic has given a body blow to the status quo, challenging almost all the factors of business –demand, supply, the way we work, our attitude towards communities, the way we look at innovation etc. While this unprecedented crisis hit everyone, we grew richer with a slew of learnings such as:

1. The organisation must have and communicate a strong sense of purpose. If kindled, it can cement the entire organisation and propel it to achieve even the most difficult goals in a crisis. A passionate call to the entire organisation that we, as an integral part of the healthcare team, together must ensure procurement, manufacture, distribution and patient servicing during the pandemic, aroused a sense of purpose - factories worked non-stop; every single patient on our life-saving drugs who reached out was serviced by the sales teams.



Yugal Sikri, MD, RPG Life Sciences

2. WFH can be even more efficient in many situations versus working from the office.
3. Physical is the only way to reach customers, was assumed for years. Phygital, the combination of physical and digital helped us achieve almost comparable share of voice with our customers.
4. Manufacturing infrastructure needs to be flexible and agile. We could run the factories at ~80 per cent capacity with 40 per cent labour force even in the most trying phases of a pandemic.
5. Skills can and do expire. Learning, adaptability, flexibility, collaboration and innovation are key to success. Learning and widespread adoption of digital happened in the form of WFH, digital conferences, virtual award functions, virtual AGMs, teleconsultation and so on.
6. A robust P&L delivery is possible amidst all existing paradigms challenged. Yes, it actually happened in H1'20 with 100 per cent production schedule met with 40 per cent labour force and 70 per cent customers met with 30 per cent physical connect.

All these lessons will be crucial in building a somewhat new and resilient business operating model.

India Pharma Inc can work with global health organisations to deliver to vulnerable populations

The COVID-19 pandemic brings a new perspective on our collective dependence on a fragile pharma industry. The past months have shown borders closed, with access to essential medicines being hampered by vaccine nationalism. For example, some high-income countries have secured enough vaccine supplies to provide up to six doses per head of population.



Jayasree K Iyer, Executive Director, Access to Medicine Foundation

However, the pandemic has also highlighted how India Pharma Inc can work with global health organisations to deliver to the most vulnerable populations, where others have failed to respond.

Notably, under the umbrella of the Medicines Patent Pool, 18 leading generic drug makers – including seven Indian companies – pledged to support the delivery of hundreds of millions of doses of affordable COVID-19 treatments for people in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Furthermore, the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine producer by volume, has already produced 40 million doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, under a licence that permits it to make 1 billion doses at cost for LMICs during the pandemic. Overall, the Institute has plans to manufacture five COVID-19 vaccines, to be distributed half in India and half to the developing world.

These milestones are possible due to demand and financing brought by a unique pandemic that affects both rich and poor. The pharma industry in India leads in bringing low-cost generic medicines to the world. But it is being impacted by tariffs and rising costs. Agility and experience in low-income markets and providing access to innovative treatments are now needed to step up to the next level.

The next Access to Medicine Index, planned for January 2021, will analyse how pharma companies are taking action to improve access to medicine. The insights will help shape the future of the pharma industry.

True risk management is all about planning well for the unexpected

The COVID-19 served as a wake-up call to the entire pharma industry around the globe. This industry has always been risk-averse and has loved to remain in silos, which is an impediment to changes and early adoption of new technologies. This pandemic has

exposed our flimsiness and forced us to challenge our limits, be it in drug development, manufacturing or supply chain.

It's truly heart-warming to see how the industry has come together in all forms of collaboration and partnership in such a short period of time, pulling in scientific experts, academia and government machineries across the boundaries. This helped in leveraging each other's competencies to expedite the processes, whether in vaccines development or bouncing back with manufacturing and a shattered supply chain. Unlike in the pre-COVID-19 era, it did not take months to identify new ways of working or to write new SOPs to deal with the challenges.



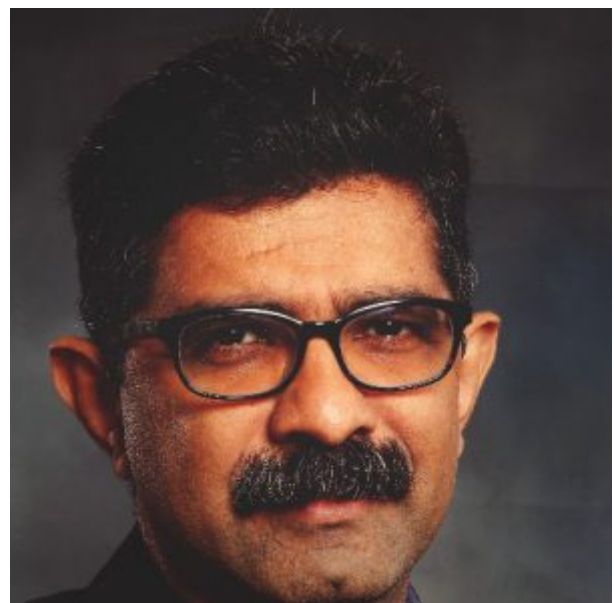
*Subrata Chakraborty,
Principal Advisor, GxPFONT Consulting
Group*

But we can't declare our victory yet. What we have garnered from this unprecedented situation is that we need to plan better for such disruptions, whether they are natural calamities, pandemics, or man-made catastrophes. As an industry, we are always reactive to the problems, if we have never encountered an event, we tend to underrate its risk. We need to change this mindset. True risk management is all about planning well for the unexpected.

Environmental-related sustainability must be the cornerstone of corporate strategy

Illness and disease are not alien to Pharma Inc. Nor are pandemics. The recent past has seen it tackle HIV/AIDS, mad cow disease and bird flu. And, there have been warnings subsequently of more pandemics to come. Yet, like for everybody else, COVID-19 was a wakeup call for the industry too.

Its foremost learning is to respect nature. Messing around with habitats, ecology, water bodies without paying heed to intergenerational equity is the epitome of



Chandru Chawla, Executive VP, CIPLA

corporate greed and can bring incalculable damage to mankind and the habitat. Environmental-related sustainability must be the cornerstone of corporate strategy. Good health and wellness are crucial for both corporates and employees. The virus was severe on people with co-morbidities.

Corporates with strong balance sheets had enough cushion to soften the impact – despite fall in incomes, they could sustain the organisations. Cash management became a daily mantra. The situation also required uncommon agility and flexibility to respond to ever-changing challenges – variable responses by state governments, rules on physical distancing and lockdowns, goods movements, improving access to medicines, responding to physicians needs digitally, response to emergencies and constantly innovating on a fast track to bring relevant pandemic related medicines to patients quickly.

Derisking the supply chain was another crucial learning. Reducing dependence on critical vendors, expanding the supply footprint, bringing manufacturing closer to markets while mitigating geopolitical risk became central in day-to-day management.

Patients and employees became core to all reimagination. India Pharma Inc has shown that it has the resilience and resolve to combat uncertainty and volatility.

(Compiled by Lakshmipriya Nair, with inputs from Usha Sharma)

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