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Pulling In 10 Different Directions – The Challenge Of Harmonizing Asia's VMS Market

by Tom Gallen

A lack of regulatory harmonization for dietary supplements in Asia is a big challenge facing companies operating in the region, according to experts from the Asia Regulatory Professionals Association. The ARPA is looking to start a conversation on the issue which the association hopes will lead to regulatory change.

Demand is surging for dietary supplements in markets across Asia as consumers with more disposable income become increasingly health conscious.

In the 10 countries that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), supplement sales are growing mid-single-digits annually, with around 40% of the population consuming a nutraceutical product every day.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated this growth – with immune health products increasingly popular – making it the perfect time for consumer healthcare companies to enter the region.

However, a lack of harmonization of regulatory and technical standards for supplements in ASEAN is a big challenge facing companies operating in the region, according to Srilatha Sreepathy of the Asia Regulatory Professionals Association (ARPA).

Sreepathy, chair of ARPA's recently-formed Vitamins, Minerals and Supplements (VMS) Chapter, tells HBW insight that a manufacturer looking to launch a supplement in five markets across the region will likely be faced with five different sets of regulatory requirements. National rules on labelling, stability data, and maximum limits for vitamins and minerals mean a new product must be tailored for each individual market, she points out, which is a time consuming and

expensive process.

To tackle this issue by effectively creating a single market for supplements, ASEAN has been working since 2004 on harmonizing standards across its 10 member states. While a draft agreement on a regulatory framework for supplements has been drawn up – based on guidelines covering 10 different areas including health claims, labelling and establishing maximum levels of vitamins and minerals – this is yet to be agreed by the members.

ARPA Working To Raise Awareness

While there is a tentative plan to sign an agreement by 2021, Sreepathy fears that the COVID-19 pandemic might push the issue further down ASEAN's agenda.

Recognizing the need for action, APRA's VMS Chapter is championing the harmonization issue and looking to raise awareness among industry, regulators, healthcare professionals and consumers. Sreepathy is supported in this endeavor by Geeta Pradeep, a pharmacy academic and Dr. A.V. Rukmini, a medical doctor and research scientist. The three are part of a network of over 4,000 ARPA members, an organization established in 2010 to raise the standard and social recognition of regulatory professionals.

ARPA founder Jack Wong explains that the organization is looking to start a conversation on VMS which will potentially lead to regulatory change. "Hopefully by raising awareness we can facilitate harmonization, because more people will talk about the issue and find solutions," he says.

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