

Made in Taiwan

By Sven Siebenand / The time when the label “Made in Taiwan” stood for cheap mass-produced goods is long gone. Nowadays, the island nation is primarily a producer of high-tech products. Pharmacy is also changing. Professor Dr. Yen-Huei (Tony) Tarn of the Taiwan Pharmacist Association gives us an insight into pharmacy, Taiwan-style.
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PZ: How does one become a pharmacist in Taiwan?

Tarn: There are eight universities in Taiwan where you can study pharmacy. It is a four-year course. At the end of the course there is an exam to pass before you become a pharmacist. You have to have worked for 640 hours in a hospital pharmacy, 200 hours in a retail pharmacy and 200 hours in industry before you can take the exam. About 1000 students graduate each year. Four universities have recently changed to a six-year course, with one exam after three years and another after six years.

PZ: Why did you choose to study pharmacy?

Tarn: When we graduate from high school in Taiwan, we have to take a university entrance exam. My score in this exam allowed me to study pharmacy. At this point, I still had no idea what pharmacists do.

PZ: It has changed fundamentally over the course of your long career as a pharmacist. How did your career develop?

Tarn: After my studies, and a period overseas in the USA, I taught pharmacoeconomics and pharmaceutical care at university as a professor for a total of 24 years. Then I became Director General of the Department of Pharmacy at Taipei City Hospital, which at that time covered ten hospitals, each with its own pharmacy. For six years now I have been working as the Executive Director of the Center for Pharmaceutical Care Development in the Taiwan Pharmacist Association.



Most pharmacies in Taiwan are owner-managed. At present, new services are being introduced into pharmaceutical care.

Photos: Tarn

PZ: What is your role there?

Tarn: A few years ago, the Pharmacist Association's national health insurance provided a budget for the development of pharmacy home care services. I am responsible for planning and implementing this project, and also for the training our colleagues need to fulfil the project.

PZ: How is the project progressing?

Tarn: The project started in 2010. Since then, pharmaceutical care activities have grown in three areas: in the home care sector, in institutions for long-term care and also in the retail pharmacies. You could say that we have expanded into two further areas. This year I have a budget of around 100 million new Taiwan dollars (around 3 million euros, Ed.) to roll out these pharmacists' projects. I hope that we can persuade the decision-makers that they become routine practice in the coming year.

PZ: The health insurance supports the development of pharmacists' services. This sounds like good conditions for retail pharmacies. Is that the case?

Tarn: No, unfortunately it is not. The majority of prescriptions are still dispensed by the pharmacies in the hospitals. The proportion of prescriptions dispensed in retail pharmacies is less than 10 percent. Around ten years ago it was agreed with the health ministry that at least repeat prescriptions for the chronically ill would be dispensed through the public pharmacies. Even this ruling has not yet been fully implemented. The hospitals want to retain prescription dispensing through their pharmacies at all costs. The reason for this is the national health insurance's remuneration system. According to this model, the more services you offer, the more you earn. The doctors also want to keep this model. Pharmaceutical care by the pharmacist could lead to a recommendation that the prescription be changed. There has not really been any collaborative working between pharmacists and doctors so far.

PZ: So, not really ideal conditions for retail pharmacies. How are you trying to improve this, and how is the market shared out between the retail pharmacies?

Tarn: The bright spots are the few pilot projects, such as ours that I have described. To enhance the reputation of retail pharmacies, in recent years we have also been working on introducing new services, further increasing the amount of advice given and also on improving IT equipment. Most retail pharmacies are owner-managed, although there are also four pharmacy chains in Taiwan. However, their market share is only 20 percent.

PZ: You are going to the congress of the FIP in Düsseldorf in the autumn. What are you expecting?

Tarn: I hope that other pharmaceutical care projects will be presented at the congress, and that colleagues can learn from each other. I hope that visits to retail pharmacies and hospital pharmacies will be organised for the foreign colleagues.