

More at stake than drug success for a trailblazing CEO

By Guy Martin – 2017-01-09

Lan Huang is no stranger to awards, from being named Soroptimist International's international-level Women's Opportunity Award in 1997 alongside her biophysical chemistry PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, to picking up China's Thousand Talent Innovator prize in 2009.

Her translational research in cancer signaling pathways involving Ras has been published in two papers in the scientific journal Nature and she has been hailed for her breakthrough work on ubiquitin-mediated protein degradation, a field of chemistry which won the Nobel Prize in 2004.

But perhaps the biggest achievement of all would be the realization of Dr Huang's ambition to take innovative drug discoveries from the benchside to the bedside, and doing so in a field where leaders are almost all men.

As chief executive of BeyondSpring, an immuno-oncology specialist with a lead asset, plinabulin, in Phase III trials and showing potential therapeutic benefits in a variety of cancers, she could well be about to make that vision a reality.

The good news for other women starting out in the industry, or seeking to advance in it, is that Dr Huang does not believe that her sex has hampered her progress.

"I was asked exactly the same question in the final interview for the Soroptimist International award," she tells The Pharma Letter. "They asked if I had faced any obstacles as a woman. I told them and I'm telling you now, "no" – I think that in the biotech business, people value you by your work."

Adding business experience to academic excellence

In Dr Huang's case, that reputation has been the result of many years of hard work.

She came to the USA from China in 1991, where her swift academic progress included the completion of her PhD thesis in four-and-a-half-years, the publication of the Nature papers and training at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center where her breakthrough research solving the first E2-E3 ubiquitin ligase structure involving P53 degradation was published in the journal Science.

The latter was published when she was still just 29, and with so many options open to her in academia and industry given her scientific training, the main reason for Dr Huang choosing to become an entrepreneur in 2001 was answering what she calls her “calling in life” to take drug discoveries to patients and help people.

From that point the hard work has continued as Dr Huang has gained vital business experience in both the USA and China.

She co-founded Wuxi MTLH Biotechnology. Its self-designed cancer peptide drug’s China rights were acquired in 2010 by Shanghai Pharmaceutical Group, one of the Asian country’s top three pharma groups.

Dr Huang also co-founded Paramax International, a Chinese contract research organization (CRO) which was sold to global CRO RPS, then to Warburg Pincus in 2011. In addition, Dr Huang worked with US investment firm Forward Ventures, where she led partnering initiatives between its portfolio companies and Chinese pharma.

One reason that this experience is so crucial is that Dr Huang learnt how to conduct global clinical trials in China for big pharma, allowing her to create the business model for BeyondSpring.

This model, by taking advantage of the expertise and contacts in China to accelerate trial enrolment and minimize costs, ensures BeyondSpring can efficiently export trial data from China.

“In 14 years as an entrepreneur I also learned to transition from very much the academic thinking into very much business thinking,” Dr Huang adds. “They are really very different.

“I also learned that in business you don’t need to do everything yourself. You build a platform, you have a vision, you get the right people in the right positions who know their areas, and together as a team, you move the project forward.”

Women CEOs 'have to be different'

However well Dr Huang has started her career in biotech, it is impossible to ignore figures which show that, as a woman leader in the sector, she is very much in the minority.

A staggering 90% of board room roles are currently held by men, making the gender gap one of the widest in any industry. That finding comes from a 2014 study by life sciences recruiter Liftstream which analyzed gender diversity of leadership across 1,500 independent small and medium-sized biotechs, revealing that 60% of those in Europe and 52% of those in the USA have all-male boards.

So what advice does Dr Huang have for women looking to follow in her footsteps?

“My advice is three-fold. Number one is work harder than everyone else. There is no shortcut,” she says, and is able to give countless examples from her academic career when she spent endless hours doing research and compiling data for papers, for example.

“Number two is for any job given, no matter how small it is, you have to do your best,” Dr Huang adds. “A lot of young people feel that washing test tubes is not important. People judge you by your application and if you think a job is too small and you don’t do the small things well, you’re never given the chance to do the important things.

“Number three is to be a quick learner,” she says, and gives the example of her realization, in an industry where great excitement suddenly grew around the potential of immuno-oncology agents, that plinabulin could be one such asset.

Generally speaking, Dr Huang feels that accepting outdated images of their sex can prevent women fulfilling their potential and says that instead belief and confidence can overcome any self doubts women have in their careers.

She also says: “To succeed as a woman chief executive, we have to be different. You don’t want to go head-to-head competing with men chief executives. We think differently and we’re made differently – the ability to juggle many things in the air is something we can use to our own benefit. Sometimes we’re a better manager because we can synthesize our colleagues’ thoughts and use a soft touch to get our ideas across.

“I think women are very good integrators, managers and leaders.”

Dr Huang believes that, as well as confronting the issues around a lack of women leaders in biotech, her company could play a role internationally.

“Another reason why I decided to be an entrepreneur was because at that time, in 2001, I knew that China would become a player on the world stage and as I’m from China and have a certain aptitude in science, I thought I could help to link the USA and China together in the health care space and start something unique with my abilities and background and to help people,” she says.

It is a further reason why Dr Huang’s story could prove to be such an interesting and important one.

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