

Pharma Insights #4

From niche to necessity: A decade of building health economics for better patient access to innovative medicines in Malaysia



Prior to joining UiTM, Dr. Choon was an academic and health economics researcher at Monash University Malaysia. She also serves on various advisory boards for multinational pharmaceutical companies and Ministry of Health. Her passion lies on improving patient access to life-saving innovative medicines in Malaysia.

By: Dr. June Choon Wai Yee

When I first co-chaired the Health Economics Forum back in 2013 at Monash University, few people had even heard of health economics. It was a niche area, and its relevance to healthcare policy was not widely understood. The first edition of the Pharmacoeconomics Guidelines in Malaysia had only been published in 2012 by the Pharmaceutical Services Programme, Ministry of Health (MOH). It was an important starting point aimed at promoting local research and embedding pharmacoeconomics into policy decisions.

Working hand in hand with the MOH, we embarked on a mission to build capacity in health economics across Malaysia. Our goal was to assist healthcare policymakers in making informed, evidence-based decisions that could better the healthcare system. It's been years of tireless engagement, but the driving force behind this effort has always been the desire to improve patient access to innovative medicines. The MOH has been a steadfast partner throughout this journey, recognizing the importance of health economics and the role it plays in evidence-based policymaking. Their support has been pivotal in helping the forum build capacity and ensure that health technology assessments (HTA) are grounded in the Malaysian context, aligning with local healthcare needs and priorities. Having the MOH as a partner lends the forum both credibility and a direct channel to influence policy discussions.

What has been equally remarkable is the industry's response. Over years, the Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia (PhAMA) and pharmaceutical companies such as Johnson & Johnson, Roche, GSK, Servier, Boehringer-Ingelheim, MSD, Merck, AstraZeneca, Pfizer and many others have shown unwavering support. This has transformed the forum into a crucial platform for public-private collaboration, bringing together academia, government, and industry to discuss the future of Malaysian healthcare. The fact that our partners are so committed to supporting and participating year after year is a testament to the forum's relevance, and the pride we all share in its success has been the greatest drive in our work.

The forum has become more than just an event—it is a MOVEMENT, a space where we come together to tackle some of the biggest challenges in healthcare.

The term "value" has become central to our work in health technology assessment (HTA). But "value" is not just about the dollar sign. It's about the broader elements that impact lives—how do we quantify the value of a mother with breast cancer, who, with the latest medicine, gets more time with her young children and experiences a better quality of life? ***It's not just about her survival; it's about the fact that her family still has her, and that those children can hold on to their mother a little longer. This is what "value" truly means—impacting lives and families in a way that no price tag can fully capture.*** This understanding, this mission, is what continues to drive me and the work we do in the Health Economics Forum.

Looking back, I am proud of how the health economics community in Malaysia has grown. Today, we have a thriving community of researchers, policymakers, and industry experts who continue to push the boundaries of what can be achieved in health economics.

My hope for the future is that the younger generation of trained health economists takes the reins and carries forward the work we've started, making even bigger strides in advocating for patient access to innovative medicines. The future of healthcare rests on the shoulders of these young professionals, and I am confident they will lead the way toward a more equitable, value-driven healthcare system for all Malaysians.



220 policymakers, pharmaceutical leaders, researchers, and healthcare professionals, fostering collaboration to shape the future of healthcare and improve patient access to innovative medicines

Highlights of the 7th Health Economics Forum 2024

The 7th Health Economics Forum, themed *Advancing Healthcare Through Societal Lens: Bridging Policy, Practice, and Innovation*, held on 17 October 2024 at the Aloft Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, gathered over 220 participants, including policymakers, healthcare professionals, and leaders from the pharmaceutical industry. Representing the Center for Drug Policy and Health Economics Research (CDPHER), Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Dr. June Choon chaired and led the Forum with her co-chairs, Prof. Kenneth Lee (Monash University Malaysia), and Prof. Asrul Akmal Shafie (Universiti Sains Malaysia). Co-organised by the Ministry of Health (MOH), and the Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia (PhAMA), the forum was also supported by its industry partners; Gold Sponsor; Johnson & Johnson, Silver Sponsors; Roche, Eisai, GSK, Boehringer-Ingelheim, and Servier, and Bronze Sponsors; AstraZeneca, MSD and Merck.

Representing the Director-General of Health Malaysia, Datuk Dr. Muhammad Radzi Abu Hassan, the event was officiated by Dr. Enna Mohd Hanafiah, Director, Planning Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia. The event fostered in-depth discussions on Health Technology Assessment (HTA) and how Malaysia can better evaluate and adopt innovative medicines.



Dr. Enna Mohd Hanafiah, Director, Planning Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia, representing the Director-General of Health Malaysia, Datuk Dr. Muhammad Radzi Abu Hassan.



Presentation of token of appreciation to Gold Sponsor, Johnson & Johnson (M)



Industry partners - without whom the success of the Health Economics Forum would not be possible.

PANEL SESSION I: TRANSFORMING HTA IN MALAYSIA—ALIGNING WITH NEW POLICY LANDSCAPES, ADDRESSING COST CHALLENGES, AND RECOGNIZING THE VALUE OF INNOVATIONS

Moderator: Professor Dr. Asrul Akmal Shafie, Professor of Pharmacoeconomics and Director of Institutional Planning & Strategic Centre, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Key Speakers:

Dr. Azmi Nor Farez Ahmat (Senior Principal Assistant Director, Formulary Management Subdivision, Pharmacy Practice & Development Division, Ministry of Health)

Topic: Health Transformation: The Imperative for Aligning and Strengthening Health Technology Assessment

Dr. Azmi emphasized that aligning HTA with new policy landscapes in Malaysia is essential for the health transformation journey. He provided insights into how HTA can be used in the decision-making of Ministry of Health Formulary listing as a tool to ensure equitable access to cost-effective medicines while promoting efficient use of resources within the healthcare system. Dr. Azmi underscored the importance of collaboration between government bodies, healthcare providers, and industry stakeholders in transforming HTA frameworks to better address future health demands.

Dr. Murallitharan Munisamy (Managing Director, National Cancer Society Malaysia)

Topic: The Critical Role of Patient Voice in HTA

Dr. Murallitharan emphasized the critical need to integrate patient voices into the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) process, pointing out that the true beneficiaries of these assessments—the patients—are often overlooked. He stressed that patient perspectives, especially concerning quality of life and treatment preferences, should be central to shaping HTA outcomes. Drawing on examples from cancer care and out-of-pocket expenditures, Dr. Murallitharan illustrated how patient input has significantly impacted decisions around innovative treatments and access to medicines. He called for a more robust inclusion of patient feedback in policy-making to ensure that healthcare decisions align with the real needs of patients.

Ms. Deepti Saraf (Vice President, PhAMA)

Topic: Capturing Value: Exploring New Horizons Beyond Budget Impact and Payer Perspectives

Ms. Saraf discussed the evolving understanding of "value" in HTA, beyond traditional cost metrics. She advocated for considering broader societal benefits, including economic productivity, improved quality of life, and reduced caregiver burden, in HTA evaluations. Ms. Saraf emphasized that innovative medicines can create substantial value that may not be fully captured by budget impact models alone and urged for a more comprehensive evaluation of their benefits.

Panel Discussion

The session concluded with a panel discussion moderated by Professor Dr. Asrul Akmal Shafie. The discussion explored how Malaysia can strike a balance between budget constraints and the need for innovation in healthcare. The panelists agreed on the necessity of a forward-looking HTA framework that goes beyond cost containment to assess the full value of innovation, especially in addressing chronic diseases and rare conditions.

PANEL SESSION II: SHARING BEST PRACTICES AND REFORM EFFORTS IN HTA

Moderator: Professor Kenneth Lee, School of Medicine, Monash University Malaysia.

Key Speakers:

Dr. Izzuna Mudla Muhammad Ghazali (Director, MaHTAS, Ministry of Health)

Topic: Enhancing HTA Evaluation Frameworks in Malaysia: Strategies and Technical Approaches

Dr. Izzuna provided a comprehensive overview of MaHTAS's initiatives to strengthen HTA processes in Malaysia. She outlined technical approaches being adopted to improve the timeliness, transparency, and stakeholder involvement in HTA decisions. Dr. Izzuna also spoke about MaHTAS's future plans to incorporate real-world data and patient-reported outcomes into the HTA process to ensure that decision-making reflects actual patient experiences and treatment effectiveness.

Mr. Nathaniel Henry (Senior Director, Vista Health Pte Ltd)

Topic: Inclusion of Broader Value Elements for the Evaluation of Innovative Medicines in Malaysia

Mr. Henry expanded on the concept of incorporating broader value elements into HTA, focusing on how these elements can lead to more comprehensive assessments of innovative therapies. He explained that broader value factors, such as societal impact, equity, and long-term cost-effectiveness, are often underrepresented in traditional evaluations but are crucial for understanding the full benefits of innovative treatments.

Professor Dr. Jasmine Pwu (CEO, Data Science Center, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan)

Topic: Reform and Innovation in Taiwan's HTA: Insights and Experiences

Professor Pwu shared Taiwan's experiences in reforming its HTA system, highlighting the challenges faced and lessons learned. She detailed Taiwan's approach to integrating patient perspectives and multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) into its HTA framework to better capture the broader impacts of healthcare innovations. Her insights provided valuable lessons for Malaysia as it embarks on its HTA reform journey.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Wanrudee Isaranuwachai (Director, Health Intervention and Technology Assessment Program (HITAP), Thailand)

Topic: Advancing HTA: Lessons from Thailand

Dr. Wanrudee shared Thailand's success in utilizing HTA to inform healthcare decision-making. She emphasized the importance of transparency and stakeholder involvement in the HTA process and discussed Thailand's use of HTA to achieve universal healthcare coverage. Her presentation reinforced the idea that HTA is not only about cost containment but also about ensuring equitable access to necessary treatments.

Dr. Vaishnavi Jeyasingam (Consultant Oncologist, Hospital Kuala Lumpur)

Topic: A Clinician's Perspective on the Value of Innovative Medicines in Enhancing Patient Care and Outcomes

Dr. Vaishnavi provided a clinician's perspective on how innovative medicines can transform patient care. She shared case studies from her oncology practice, demonstrating how new treatments have improved survival rates and quality of life for cancer patients. Dr. Vaishnavi emphasized the importance of including clinical insights in HTA evaluations to ensure that innovative therapies are accurately assessed for their real-world impact.

Panel Discussion

Moderated by Professor Dr. Kenneth Lee, the panel discussion emphasized the need for Malaysia to adopt flexible and adaptive HTA frameworks that reflect the changing landscape of healthcare innovation. Panelists agreed on the importance of incorporating broader value elements and learning from regional and international experiences to strengthen Malaysia’s HTA system.



Group photo; together with two renowned experts from Thailand, Associate Professor Dr. Wanrudee Isaranuwatchai, Director of HITAP, and Professor Dr. Jasmine Pwu, former director of Health Technology Assessment Division, Centre for Drug Evaluation (CDE), Taiwan.

SESSION III: THERAPEUTIC INSIGHTS

Moderator: Dr. June Choon, Center for Drug Policy and Health Economics Research (CDPHER), Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Key Speakers:

Professor Dr. Lotte Steuten (Deputy Chief Executive, Office of Health Economics, UK)

Topic: The Next Generation of Value Assessment: Beyond Cost per QALY in Health Technology Assessment

Professor Steuten discussed the limitations of using cost-per-QALY (quality-adjusted life year) as the sole metric in HTA evaluations. She proposed new methodologies for assessing value, including the use of real-world evidence and multi-criteria decision-making tools, to better reflect the complexities of healthcare innovation. Her presentation set the tone for rethinking how value is assessed in HTA processes.



Professor Lotte Steuten delivering an insightful presentation on exploring the future of Health Technology Assessment beyond cost per QALY to enhance healthcare decision-making and patient outcomes, with the moderator, Dr June Choon, posing questions on pressing issues of HTA in the Malaysian context.

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Mr. Yufan Ho (Director, Value Evidence & Outcomes, GSK)

Topic: Optimizing Healthcare Costs through Adult Immunization: Economic Benefits and Policy Implications

Mr. Ho highlighted the economic and public health benefits of adult immunization, arguing that preventive care is an often-overlooked component of healthcare cost management. He shared data on how adult immunization programs can reduce healthcare costs and improve health outcomes, urging for stronger policy support in this area.



Prof. Dato' Dr. Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed, Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, presenting a token of appreciation to Mr Yufan Ho, Director, Value Evidence & Outcomes, GSK.

Professor Dr. Asrul Akmal Shafie (Professor of Pharmacoeconomics, Universiti Sains Malaysia)

Topic: Navigating Challenges for HTA Bodies in Rare Disease Evaluation: Should We Have a Separate Framework for Rare Diseases?

Professor Dr. Asrul discussed the unique challenges that HTA bodies face in evaluating treatments for rare diseases. He advocated for a separate HTA framework to address these challenges, focusing on the high costs and small patient populations associated with rare diseases. He called for more flexible approaches to evaluating these therapies to ensure that patients with rare diseases are not left behind.

Dato' Dr. Tunku Muzafar Tunku Jaafar (Consultant Geriatrician, Hospital Selayang)

Topic: Preparing for the Future Meaningfully: Geriatrics and the Cost of Aging

Dr. Tunku Muzafar spoke about the importance of addressing the healthcare needs of Malaysia's aging population.



Q&A: Dato' Dr. Tunku Muzafar gave a candid response on the current healthcare infrastructure and policies, and if they are adequately prepared to meet the growing demand for specialized geriatric care.

Patient Sharing by Sofia and Joyce

Topic: Beyond Skin Deep: Patient Perspective on Access and Impact to Societal Contribution

This deeply moving session brought the patient’s voice to the forefront. Sofia and Joyce shared personal stories of how access to innovative medicines had transformed their lives. Sofia and Joyce, who had been diagnosed with psoriasis, spoke about the importance of early access to cutting-edge treatments, which not only improved her health outcomes but also allowed her to contribute meaningfully to society as a working professional. Joyce echoed these sentiments, sharing her journey of battling psoriasis that once left her feeling isolated but, thanks to access to life-saving medication, gave her hope and the ability to maintain her role as a mother and community member. Their stories highlighted the human aspect of healthcare, emphasizing that the true value of medicine goes far beyond clinical outcomes—it’s about enabling individuals to live fulfilling lives and continue contributing to their families and society.



Joyce shared her journey of battling psoriasis that once left her feeling isolated not just from the society, but also her own children and family.

Closing Remarks

The Forum concluded with closing remarks from Ms Deepti Saraf, Vice President of PhAMA and Prof. Dato’ Dr. Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed, Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, who thanked all participants, co-chairs, speakers, and partners for their invaluable contributions. Prof. Abu Bakar emphasized the importance of continuing to build strong partnerships between academia, government, and industry to advance healthcare innovation in Malaysia.



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