

Blazing a Nontraditional Trail - An Interview with Ms. Anita Chan

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an interview with Ms. Anita Chan, a pharmacist whose distinguished career spans community pharmacy, non-governmental organization (NGO) leadership, and executive roles within the pharmaceutical industry. The discussion traces her unconventional path from frontline patient care in the U.S. to her pivotal role in founding the innovative Pharm+ outpatient service at St. James' Settlement in Hong Kong, and subsequently to her different roles at Pfizer and Viatrix. Ms. Chan reflects on the critical skills and mindset required for these transitions, emphasizing adaptability, observant listening, and a solution-oriented approach to overcome uncertainty. She articulates a leadership philosophy guided by the principle of being “like water” — flexible and humble — while never forgetting one's foundational commitment to patient care. The interview concludes with advice for early-career pharmacists, encouraging exploration, continuous learning, and maintaining passion to navigate the profession's vast possibilities and achieve a fulfilling career.

INTRODUCTION

Ms. Anita Chan is currently the Head of Innovative Product Planning for Greater China at Viatrix. She also holds academic appointments as an Honorary Assistant Professor at the University of Hong Kong and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She earned her Bachelor of Pharmacy from the University of Iowa and began her career as Director of Operations at Sam's Club Pharmacy in the U.S. After returning to Hong Kong in 2009, she played a pivotal role in establishing the community pharmacy at St. James' Settlement and served as Pharmacy Manager. She later joined Pfizer, advancing through roles in medical affairs and marketing to become General Manager of both Pfizer and Viatrix. With experience spanning frontline care and strategic leadership, Ms. Chan is a respected leader in pharmacy.



INTERVIEW WITH Ms. ANITA CHAN

Q: Can you tell us about your early experiences as a community pharmacist in the U.S.?

Anita: Initially, I had planned to attend medical school and become a surgeon after completing my pharmacy degree. I decided to take a gap year before applying — but that gap year gradually turned into several years. During that time, I began working as a staff pharmacist at a community pharmacy in a small town in the states. It was there that I met Alice, the pharmacy manager, who truly embodied the principles of pharmaceutical care. She had an incredible ability to notice the smallest details and build trust with patients. I vividly remember a case where her attentiveness helped uncover a situation of domestic abuse — she supported the patient in getting the help she needed. That moment left a deep impression on me. When Alice eventually moved on, I stepped into the role of pharmacy manager. My time there showed me how meaningful and impactful community pharmacy could be, and it ultimately convinced me to stay in the profession. The experience shaped not only my career path but also my understanding of the vital role pharmacists play in patient care.

Q: Can you tell us more about the experience in setting up St. James' Settlement Pharmacy?

Anita: Back in 2009, Pharm+ at St. James' Settlement introduced an innovative outpatient pharmacy service under a non-governmental organization (NGO) model. The aim was to bridge the gap between the public healthcare system and underserved patients, particularly the elderly. From our outreach work in the community, we identified a significant need — many elderly patients were confused about their medications, unsure of how to take them or what they were for. We wanted to deliver pharmaceutical care that went beyond dispensing, focusing on education, access, and personalized support.

I was brought on board as the Pharmacy Manager to help build this service from the ground up. When I first started, all we had was a physical location on the 8th floor of a building — no pharmacy license, no premises permit, and none of the basic infrastructure in place. At that time, it was very rare for the Department of Health to approve a pharmacy license for an upstairs location unless it was part of a shopping mall, which made the application process particularly challenging. I had to oversee everything from navigating regulatory requirements to ensuring the proper environmental conditions for medication storage, including temperature and humidity control.

Beyond the logistics, I was committed to setting up a space that allowed for real pharmaceutical care. We designed private consultation areas where pharmacists could sit down with patients to provide counseling in a comfortable and confidential setting. We also realized that financial barriers were a major reason for poor medication adherence among the elderly. Some patients would take only half a dose to make their supply last longer. To address this, we studied the Hospital Authority's drug formulary and introduced a financial subsidy program for self-financed medications. This service was appointment-based, allowing social workers to assess patients' financial needs and facilitate access to subsidized medications.

The financial subsidy initiative was a win-win-win model — for the NGO, the patients, and pharmaceutical companies. I worked closely with pharma partners to secure sponsorships for patients who were both financially and medically in need. In return, pharmaceutical companies had the opportunity to introduce their products to the public sector, as NGO staff would pitch their drugs to doctors in public hospitals after reviewing the relevant clinical data. GSK was our first partner in this initiative, generously sponsoring medications for eligible patients. We also implemented other forward-thinking services, such as telepharmacy through video calls — an especially novel concept at the time — and visual aids for patients with visual impairments or low literacy. These tools helped ensure that patients fully understood how to take their medications correctly and safely.

Setting up the pharmacy at St. James' Settlement was one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of my career. It reinforced my belief in the importance of pharmaceutical care and the pharmacist's role in creating patient-centered, accessible healthcare solutions.

Q: At what point did you decide to move from community pharmacy into the pharmaceutical industry? What influenced that decision?

Anita: One of the key reasons I eventually transitioned from community pharmacy into the pharmaceutical industry was related to my personality. I've always been someone who doesn't like to stay in one place or setting for too long — I thrive on new challenges and continuous growth. While I deeply valued my work at St. James' Settlement and the impact we were making in pharmaceutical care, I started to feel the urge to explore a different side of healthcare.

During my time at St. James', I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Stephen Leung, who was the General Manager of Pfizer at the time. He became a mentor, teacher, and an inspiring leader to me. One day, he asked if I would consider trying out a role in the pharmaceutical industry. I was open to new experiences, so I said yes — and that's how I started my journey at Pfizer as a Medical Affairs Manager for vaccines. Eventually, I also moved into marketing roles, which gave me a broader perspective on how the industry operates.

Although the setting changed, my commitment to pharmaceutical care remained the same. I believe that community pharmacy allows pharmacists to deliver care directly to patients, but the pharmaceutical industry also plays a crucial role in the healthcare ecosystem. In medical affairs, we ensure that the information shared with healthcare professionals is accurate, evidence-based, and unbiased. In marketing, we have the responsibility to promote products ethically and transparently so that patients and providers can make informed decisions. Both functions ultimately contribute to better patient outcomes, just through different avenues.

Importantly, I've also been able to leverage the network and resources available in the pharmaceutical industry to support patient education initiatives. By collaborating with healthcare professionals and using the tools provided by the company, we've been able to deliver educational programs that empower patients, improve adherence, and ultimately enhance health outcomes. This has been a deeply fulfilling part of my work.

This shift allowed me to continue contributing to pharmaceutical care in a broader, more systemic way — something that aligned with both my values and my desire for continuous growth.

Q: What were some of the most important skills you had to develop as you moved up the corporate ladder?

Anita: One of the most important skills I had to develop as I progressed into senior leadership roles was flexibility. In such a role, you're constantly juggling the needs and priorities of different departments, from medical and marketing to sales and regulatory. Each team has its own goals and perspectives, and it's crucial to find a balance that respects their input while still driving overall business success. At the end of the day, every decision must not only align with the company's values but also ensure its profitability and sustainability.

A philosophy that has guided me throughout my journey can be captured in eight Chinese characters that I hold dear: 上善若水·無忘初心. The first part, "The highest virtue is like water," reminds me to stay adaptable, humble, and responsive to change — just like water that takes the shape of its container. The second part, "Never forget why you started," keeps me grounded in my original passion for healthcare and pharmaceutical care. These principles have helped me grow not just as a leader, but as a person who strives to make meaningful contributions in every role I take on.

Q: Your career path is quite unconventional for a pharmacist. How did you handle uncertainty during transitions and adjust into the new environment?

Anita: My career path has indeed been unconventional, and navigating its transitions required a significant shift in mindset. My pharmacy training was inherently rigid, providing a very structured framework for patient care. However, I quickly learned that to succeed in diverse workplaces, I had to become profoundly accommodating and flexible. My primary strategy was to approach each new environment with a mindset of observation and listening, prioritizing understanding the established workflows and valuing the opinions and experiences of my new colleagues.

I adopted a principle of not dismissing new ideas or methods outright. Instead of saying "no" at first, I made a conscious effort to explore alternatives and understand the underlying rationale behind different processes. This approach allowed me to integrate more smoothly into new teams, demonstrate respect for existing cultures, and ultimately find innovative solutions that blended my unique pharmaceutical expertise with the needs of the new role. It taught me that uncertainty is best handled not with rigidity, but with adaptive curiosity and a solution-oriented attitude.

Q: What encouragement would you like to share with young pharmacists who are unsure of their future paths?

Anita: The advice I want to share isn't just for young pharmacists — it applies to all pharmacists, regardless of where they are in their careers. The pharmacy profession is full of possibilities, and sometimes the key is simply to be open to them.

Don't be afraid to explore. Try new roles, venture into unfamiliar areas, and allow yourself the freedom to grow. Whether it's community pharmacy, hospital, or industry, each experience will teach you something valuable. You might not know where you'll end up, but every step will shape your path.

Stay positive, especially during tough times. Everyone goes through ups and downs in their career journey. It's during the difficult moments that your mindset matters most. Believe in your abilities, and remember that challenges are part of growth.

At the same time, stay humble. With the rapid development of AI, new technologies, and emerging therapies, the healthcare landscape is constantly evolving. That's why it's so important to keep learning, stay curious, and embrace change. Use new tools and knowledge to seek out new opportunities. Never stop equipping yourself — what you learn today could open the door to your next big opportunity tomorrow.

Above all, stay passionate about your work. Passion fuels purpose, and purpose is what keeps us going even when the path is unclear. Whether you're helping one patient or leading a team, that passion will shine through and make a difference.

When I look back on my life, I feel grateful. I've raised two wonderful children, experienced different roles across various sectors, and stayed true to my commitment to pharmaceutical care. I've done my best, and I have no regrets. My hope is that the readers of this article — especially those who may be feeling unsure — will one day look back and feel the same sense of fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

Ms. Anita Chan's unconventional career path demonstrates that a pharmacist's impact extends far beyond a single practice setting, defined instead by a core commitment to patient care. Her journey from community pharmacy to NGO founder and industry executive serves as a powerful blueprint for professional adaptability, guided by a philosophy of being fluid like water while remaining anchored to one's original purpose. Ultimately, her story is an inspiring testament to the vast possibilities within pharmacy, encouraging professionals to embrace uncertainty with curiosity and passion to blaze their own unique and fulfilling trails.

Author's background

MA, Suet-ting Christy is a BPharm graduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She was working as a Pharmacy Intern at Haleon Hong Kong Limited while writing this article.

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