

Fujifilm's Ebola drug underscores new face of Japan Inc.

October 27 2014

Fujifilm's potential as a major player in the fight against the Ebola virus underscores a move by some of Japan's best-known firms to reinvent their businesses as demand for traditional products falls away.

Last week, the company once synonymous with cameras and photo booths said it was increasing supply of its drug Avigan, which has been given to several patients who were evacuated from Ebola-hit West Africa to Europe.

The firm said it has enough Avigan tablets—approved as an influenza drug in Japan—to treat 20,000 people and enough of its active ingredient for 300,000 more treatments.

Some research papers report that Avigan has been effective in testing with mice, the company said, while the governments of France and Guinea are planning to conduct clinical trials in mid-November.

If the drug proves effective against a virus that has killed nearly 5,000 people, it would burnish Fujifilm's credentials in the pharmaceutical field.

It would also lend support to its broader move into a range of sectors—including cosmetics, dietary supplements and [medical equipment](#)—after demand for camera film plummeted a decade ago.

"Fujifilm has been reborn as a company that will change the future

across six fields of business," chief executive Shigetaka Komori said in a message to mark the firm's 80th anniversary this year.

But the shift from pictures to pills is not unique among Japan's manufacturing giants as fierce competition from lower-cost rivals, a shrinking domestic market and out-of-date products push them into new businesses.

'New fields'

Sony has leveraged its expertise to meet demand in medical science, incorporating technology usually found in Blu-Ray disc readers into the design of a new cell analysis device used in cancer and stem cell research.

Panasonic has also tried its hand at medical machinery, while Toshiba has gone one step further by opening its own hospital in central Tokyo that is kitted out almost entirely with its own-brand machinery and equipment.

"As the market environment changed, it was natural for Japanese companies to move into new fields in place of their core businesses," Yasuhiro Nakazawa, senior analyst at SMBC Nikko Securities, told AFP on Monday.

"And the health care and medical sector is promising, especially in Japan where the ageing population is boosting demand."

It is not only electronics companies which have decided to dabble in the medical market. The sector has also attracted companies more usually associated with products that are frowned upon by doctors.

Beer maker Kirin produces a range of medicine used to treat cancer,

kidney disease and [high blood pressure](#) through its affiliate, while Japan Tobacco runs a medical research laboratory, marketing its own anti-HIV compounds and treatments for melanoma skin cancer.

And as Fujifilm grabs headlines for its Ebola drug, even a little-known Japanese firm is trying to increase its presence by joining the fight against the virus with high-tech face masks.

Clever, a maker of air filters, says it is donating thousands of its \$75 masks for use by doctors and other health professionals in Ebola-hit Guinea, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Citation: Fujifilm's Ebola drug underscores new face of Japan Inc. (2014, October 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-fujifilm-ebola-drug-underscores-japan.html>

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