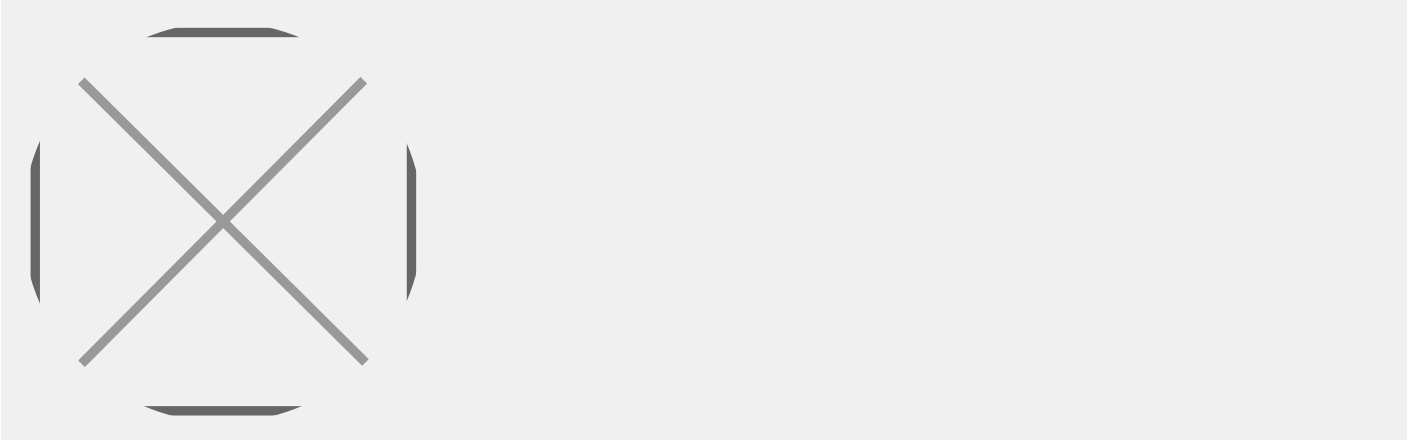
Interview with Maria Cristina Álvarez, Country President, Novartis Colombia



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In our last meeting, you said that you were looking forward to a decade of continuous growth and to be the number one partner of choice for patients, physicians, governments and institutions. In what way have you been able to do that?

Novartis Colombia has a broader portfolio compared to four years ago. The affiliate has entered new therapeutic areas such as multiple sclerosis, respiratory, and expanded significantly on its oncology portfolio. Furthermore, the company has been consolidating its investment in development and clinical research. Now Novartis Colombia is investing twice as much in clinical research as it did four years ago. The affiliate is more robust, which means a greater number of truly innovative products are being launched. I have also been able to transform the company in terms of assuring that all new products are successfully introduced into the market in order to become real solutions for patients. The affiliate has also acquired broader expertise in new areas, such as market access and pharmacoeconomic studies which are key to assuring broader access to quality medicines.

Would you say that this transformation and expansion of your portfolio has been partly in response to the worldwide trend of Loss of Exclusivity and patent expiry?

Colombia has a good Patent regulation. It is one of the few countries in Latin America that has data protection, but as a sector there are very few patents here because the approval process is too

strict and lengthy. However this is detrimental in that a product that demonstrates real innovation should be protected from its inception. Because of this long patent approval, when the patent is finally obtained you have already missed the opportunity for protection. For Novartis, innovation is the core of everything the organization does.

What impact do you think the upcoming reforms, as proposed by Minister Gaviria, will have on the way Novartis products are sold in Colombia?

We do not have any set guarantee regarding what will happen. I believe that Colombia has a solid and advanced healthcare system. Different sectors are claiming in some aspects that reforms are introducing very radical changes that could be dangerous. The system undoubtedly requires adjustments, but not to change the system completely; history has demonstrated success. When you look at the key indicators with this system, coverage has been radically increased and the results of the quality of coverage for all population sectors prove this. How these reforms will affect the system depend on how drastic the changes are. I am concerned mostly about the transition period. If radical changes are introduced, the transition period needs to be long enough to not affect the patient. Furthermore, I am also concerned about the benefit coverage plan because it is uncertain which products would be covered by the system and also by the assurance that all changes introduced are aligned with international standards. That is the only way that Colombia can end up with a truly more efficient and effective healthcare system than before. The current goal is really to make this move to the next stage in the health reform process for all stakeholders involved.

In 2010 you said how you were concerned about the vigilance of generic drugs in Colombia. Would you say that today there is a better monitoring of the generic system here?

Generics are still in the same situation today. I think that this is one of the main issues that the Minister of Health should be addressing with this reform. That is the only way to promote the national pharmaceutical industry as one of the purposes of the country. Colombia needs to have a national industry of high quality standards and a healthcare system that protects all Colombians from poor-quality products coming from countries with low standards. The government is currently reviewing biologics regulations, however the draft regulation issued for public comments does not follow international standards. If these regulations were important for chemical products, then they are even more important for biological products because each product is different and those differences could affect significantly the outcome in the patient.

Could you tell us about some of the most interesting products in 2013 that you are most excited about?

Novartis has recently introduced Gilenya®, the first ever oral treatment for multiple sclerosis. It has already been in the market for one year. This kind of innovation is transforming the life of patients with multiple sclerosis. Nine out of ten patients have found significant success with this product, which is very important to ensure the efficacy of the product. In Oncology, Novartis has developed a revolutionary treatment for women with metastasic breast cancer, Afinitor, which also has been in the market for a year. The company also has a very interesting pipeline in the respiratory area; mainly EPOC and asthma as well as in psoriasis and other dermatological diseases.

What is the clinical trial situation in Colombia for Novartis?

Novartis Colombia has invested heavily in clinical research. In the last 5 years approximately 30 million USD was invested in 200 clinical studies with 4000 patients. I expect at least to duplicate our investments in the next five years as a result of Novartis Colombia's strong pipeline.

Last year, recently launched products accounted for roughly $16 billion of group net sales, a 25 percent increase from 2011. What is the strategic importance of Colombia in that figure?

I think that Colombia is very important for Novartis and for the region because of the developed healthcare system that the country has, despite the problems that are currently being fixed. Having coverage of more than 90 percent allows Novartis use its entire portfolio in Colombia.

Could Novartis Colombia serve as a role model to other affiliates?

We do serve as a role model to others affiliates in some areas that we have been able to develop great expertise and obtain results.

In 2011, Novartis was the first company in all of Colombia to be given the "Work Life Balance" award by the European Institute of Social Capital. What are the main characteristics of Novartis Colombia that lead it to be given this honor?

I believe that the main reason is the power of the culture that we have developed in Novartis Colombia. It is a culture based on collaboration and openness that really engages every employee towards our mission, which is doing whatever we can do and trying our best to satisfy the needs of patients who can benefit from Novartis' products. That is the real success. This culture has been a journey. It is not something you do from one day to the next. This journey is shared by every associate that works at Novartis.

Novartis is known around the world for its commitment to corporate social responsibility. In what ways does Novartis Colombia actively promote CSR policy as part of its commitment to the country?

Novartis has several social responsibility programs that are based in Colombia. Our program "Roof for Colombia" continues to this day, and this program is based on a recycling model that increases the awareness and culture of recycling among our employees and their families, thus spreading consciousness of recycling beyond the office. With the funds received from recycling we donate a house to a wounded veteran of our armed forces. Every year, Novartis participates in a Community Partnership Day worldwide. On that day, we donate a full day's work along with all of our associates to social programs. In the last couple of years, Novartis has built over a dozen houses in Altos de Cazucá in association with the Catalina Muñoz Foundation. It is hard work, but very satisfactory for employees because they have the opportunity to change the life of a whole family in a very difficult situation. Novartis was the first company in the pharmaceutical industry to build houses, and now more and more companies are doing the same. The impact on the community is huge, but perhaps it is even more so for the people from the company who participate.

Looking ahead to the future, if we were to return to Colombia in another three to four years, what is your vision for the affiliate by that time?

Novartis is working on increasing its investment in clinical trials as well as collaboration with other industries in order to develop better solutions for patients within the new healthcare system that will exist in the future. I think that collaboration is the key success factor for the future. If different sectors work together, we are undeniably going to be able to develop better solutions.

As a final message, what might be a piece of advice that you might give to a young entrepreneur on behalf of Novartis Colombia?

One of Novartis' pillars of culture power is diversity, which means growth from collaboration through different ideas from different people. Novartis' gender diversity is strong, and the affiliate is working to broaden its ethnic diversity even more. This is something that I want to continue to increase. Furthermore, Novartis has a very strong program for internships from universities, particularly with students from abroad. This is particularly interesting and is a very good ingredient in the creation of a very powerful culture – different ideas, approaches and experiences. I want to promote this as much as possible. Welcome to Colombia, and welcome to Novartis!

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